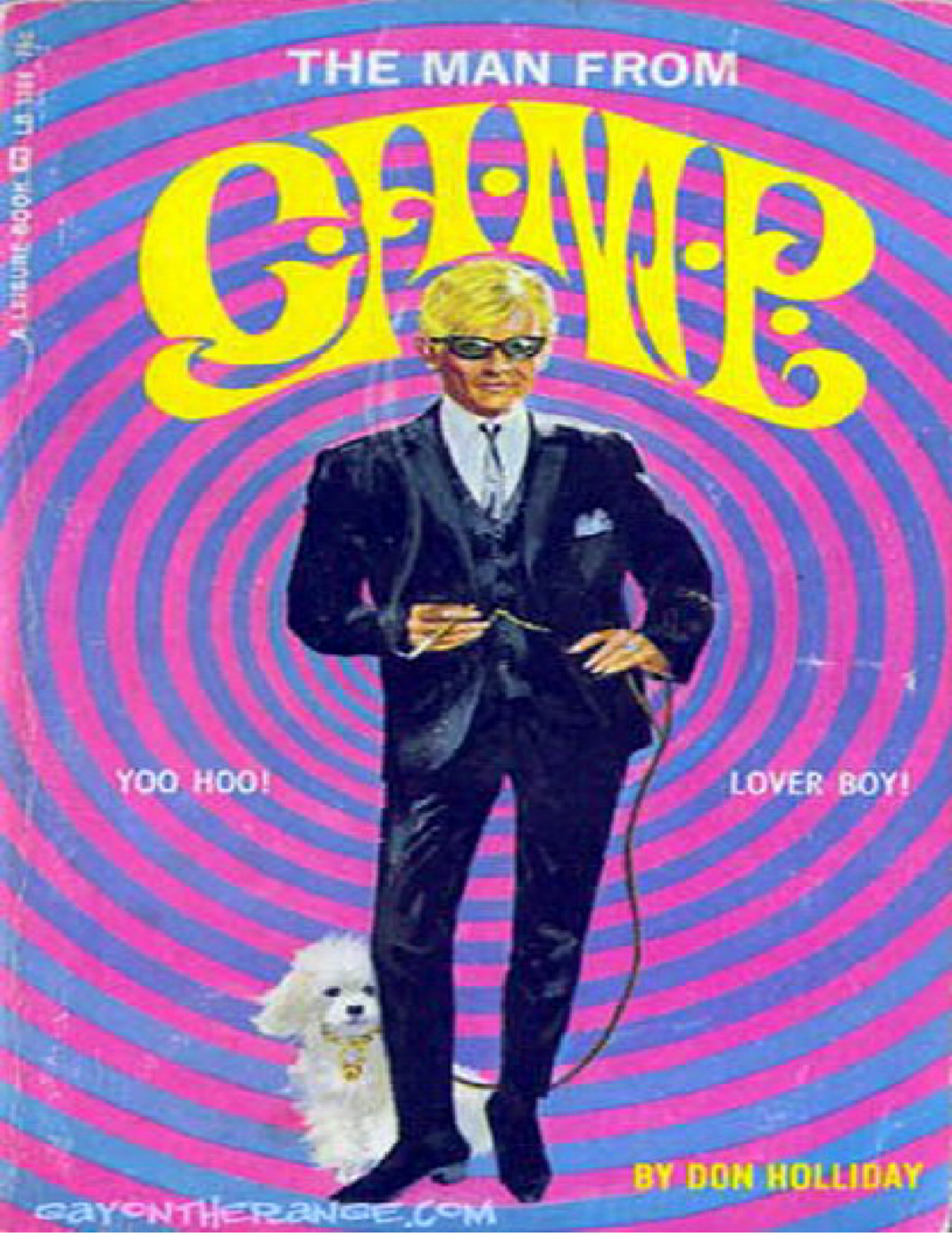
THE MAN FROM
G·A·Y·P·
YOO HOO!
LOVER BOY!
BY DON HOLLIDAY
A LEISURE BOOK
gayontherange.com

MLR Press, LLC
www.mlrpress.com

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That Very Man: An Interview with Victor J. Banis

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THE MAN FROM C.A.M.P.
Victor J. Banis
mlrpress

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Foreword

Of Spies, Diamonds, and Queens (or, acting like an editor)

What's in a spy? Well, a spy is a spy is a spy is a spy, we might say, echoing a highly distinguished literary rose. Such iteration, however, brings forth no commonplace factuality: it is rather a statement of the threefold soul of the secret agent, of the mobile, flexible, and performative identity inherent to his or her clandestinity, to an "undercover" existence led on the fringes of legality.

First of all, lexicographers tell us, a spy is a secret voyeur on people and things, someone who stealthily seeks information from hostile motives, prying for military, political, technological, or industrial information about "the enemy"; in short, the secret agent, detecting, collecting, and transmitting reserved data, is the root of modern intelligence.

Second, and consequently, even when he or she does not indulge in double-crossing, the spy is ethically ambiguous and doubly so: on one side, intelligence is based on masquerade, disguise, and deceit; on the other side, the spy's moral value depends on who is the enemy, the spy or the spied. In other words, it depends on who the spy plays for. A spy can thus be regarded as a secret agent of good or evil forces, a traitor or savior, someone whose secrecy is a necessary way to keep evil plots under control; a necessary and exciting way, novels and movies tell us, for the spy can indeed break taboos: he or she is licensed to kill, drink, and gamble, but especially, we must admit we all noted it, to be promiscuous. Not for personal pleasure, of course: just for the sake of the nation, no doubt about it.

And yet, unsurprisingly, there's more than meets the (sp)eye. Given its meaning of "informer," the word *spy* can be stretched in some languages (for instance, in the Italian *spia)* to mean not only the subject but also the object of the prying gaze, i.e., what the spy-observer detects. As an informer, a spy is metaphorically close indeed to circumstantial evidence, to a clue, trace, peephole, symptom, or telltale sign.

So, there's something queer in what a spy *is,* after all. The more so when the spy's name is Jackie Holmes, and the agency he works for is the esoterically named C.A.M.P., a secret organization created in 1966

by young author Victor J. Banis (appropriately publishing Jackie's adventures under disguise, under the byline Don Holliday), who had published just one gay novel at the time, and would rapidly become a major figure in queer pulp, with an impressive record of books well over a hundred gay and lesbian pulps, gothic romances, and many other "connoisseurs' choices" under an equally impressive number of *noms deplume* of both genders. Every now and then, he resorted to the "explicit veil" of anonymity, or used the most cunning impersonation of Victor Banis, a mask echoing the "earnest" tradition of Oscar Wilde's Ernest. It was the *Man from C.A.M.P.* book series, however, that boosted indeed this talented-writer-in-disguise into hyperactivity on the paperback mass market of the late 1960s and 1970s, making him a most appreciated figure in the paperback culture industry (I guess he must have had many "this month's employee" prizes in the pulp factory of Greenleaf, Corinth, and other publishing houses he worked for), and—just like his dear creature, Jackie Holmes a sort of underground celebrity.

There are definitely many queer things about Victor Banis's serial spy fiction. The secret organization C.A.M.P., and its top agent—due to appear in eight novels in the following two years, plus a cookbook, and an astrology guide—were in fact dedicated to "the protection and advancement of homosexuals": no predictable, straight stuff like "Bond, James Bond" and his many look-alikes. Jackie Holmes was thus both good (well, excellent) and *very* evil, according to contemporary cultural standards; and his agency, C.A.M.P., can be taken as a clue, a superb telltale sign of, oh, a number of things—let's just say here, the cultural history of the 1960s.

We are surrounded by spies. Their pervasive presence, certified in the past hundred years in cinema, television programs, and literature, has been turned into an all-too-evident issue by the recent burgeoning of international terrorism, peopling our streets with endless potential spies, and with even more secret agents and devices of surveillance than those we had uneasily grown accustomed to. Our age is the age of CCTV and of Echelon, God's ear, the all-listening surveillance network chaired by NSA, an age in which business, state affairs, and wars, are conducted by means of intelligence rather than with mere investments, diplomacy, and armies.

Our fictional as well as our physical landscape, as a matter of fact, is jam-packed with secret agents. Every week or so another action thriller film is released, starring new moles and secret agents, or bringing back to celluloid life charming ghosts—Charlie's Angels, Ethan Hunt, Emma Peel, and John Steed are just a few worth

mentioning—from the golden age of pop villains and heroes, the 1960s and 1970s, engaging them in more and more Missions Implausible. While such comebacks, as seriously as they may take themselves (in some cases, at least), are largely justified in their bearing witness to the charms of ingenuity of times gone by, they often exploit the camp flavor of the originals—when they don't straightforwardly indulge in a camp rewriting of 1960s camp classics. Such is the case, of course, with Austin Powers, the spy who cloned and recloned himself after the arch-camp James Bond from the 1967 film version of Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale*—warning us all, in doing so, of the dangers of genetic engineering.

But why was spy fiction so central to postwar years? Possibly for the very same reasons that brought Jackie Holmes to life, along with legions of pulp characters and a throng of superheroes. That was the time when battles were increasingly fought not by means of troops and weapons, but by secret agencies. In the 195 Os and 1960s, cultural historians tell us, there was a war indeed, with moves, tactics, strategies. It was not just the well-advertised Cold War between the free West and the Soviet bloc: it was rather some kind of civil war. (Well, it was so much of a civil war as to reach the point of being. in some cases, not just *civil* but *exquisite.)*

Spies were on the move indeed, undermining U.S. identity and disheartening the struggle to save the free world. As early as 1948, the Kinsey Report reinforced the fluff-your-way-into-Fruedian-theory view of human sexuality, placing everybody on a bisexual continuum. So. good citizens learned that there might be something queer in everybody—and everybody meant *even themselves.* From the 1950s on, pulp sociological studies and shocking novels—gaudy content wrapped in lurid art covers—increasingly exploited such thrill, representing a queer underworld packed with hustlers, drug dealers and addicts, “odd girls out” and sad-boys-doomed-to-tragedy, fairies and faggots, drag queens and kings, transvestites and fetish lovers. Squares learned that they lived quite close to many furtive enemies of the state, and they were both shocked and tickled into venturing on social downsides. All you needed to do was look for them in the right place—a drugstore or a newsstand might be a good starting point if you looked at the right racks, for there you could easily read about their evil deeds—and there they were, hundreds, thousands of them. Suspicion on the neighbor's sexuality bloomed in McCarthyite culture: both spies and unorthodox sexualities lived in masquerade, acting and impersonation, after all. Editorialists from Great Britain stated it out loud and clear: homosexuals, who lived by means of cunning and deceit, made natural spies. If you joined an aesthetic disposition to

such homosexual feelings, well, that made two clues leading from suspect to culprit. Common wisdom said homosexuals were doubly available to unAmerican activities: on the one side they were not real men and proper citizens; on the other side their vulnerability to blackmailing made them prey to communists, who might lure them into becoming spies. So, keep your eyes wide open, and watch out for them.

Courts were a crucial battleground. As film censorship had to loosen the grip it had established in prewar years—the 1930 Hays Code set the moral standards for Hollywood studio productions, banning "sex perversion" of all kinds from representation along with rape, detailed descriptions of brutal killings, and other such amenities—in the 1950s popular films increasingly gave way to homosexual stock characters, to drag (some may like it *very* hot and, despite what they claim, gentlemen may prefer *those* blonds), and to the tradition that Rebecca Bell-Metereau surveys in *Hollywood Androgyny* (Columbia University Press, 1985). A series of sensational trials on the rights of the press brought even more visibility to unorthodox sexualities, and their surprising verdicts entailed a change in legal standards. Echoes of the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial came from Great Britain first, in 1960, along with the production of two films *(Oscar Wilde* and *The Trials of Oscar Wilde)* on the greatest "sodomite" of modern times, the subject of the most sensational trial and stigmatization of the late nineteenth century. H. Lynn Womack—the king of "physique pictorials," i.e., male erotic photo magazines, and a champion of First Amendment rights—won a historical legal action in 1961 that acknowledged the right of his magazines to circulate in the United States, paving the road to Womack's mail-order book service called the Guild Press, that would bring him to chair a gay porn empire. As gay pulp fiction—different from lesbian-themed pulps had an allegedly "inherent" pornographic nature, its circulation was closely tied to the forensic battlefield. When William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* got away with it in 1966, it was pretty clear that nothing would stop the pulp revolution, bringing paper spies and their real-life counterparts on the lead. Stonewall was just around the corner.

In the 1960s, the attack on U.S. sexual citizenship found several allies in the sneaky erosion of straight gender roles and identity models. Pulp fiction's sensationalism was in fact a stage mirroring the different challenges brought by mass culture and unorthodox sexualities to the establishment. Endless images construe a decade of antiauthoritarian rebellion, challenging social norms. Hippies and rockers, Timothy Leary and the LSD counterculture, feminist activism, poster art and flower child cult, happenings and collage, action poetry, New York

intellectuals, Tom Wolfe's radical chic and new journalism, Leslie Fieldler's pop and freaks, reader-response criticism, the *Batman* series aired by ABC network, unisex fashion, optical design and outrageous architecture, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol's queer Pop Art and icons, fifteen-minutes celebrity culture, underground films—championed by Kenneth Anger and Jack Smith—indulging in visual excess and perversions both sexual and cinematic, beat music, Jim Morrison, the Rolling Stones and their sympathy for the devil, the Kinks and their "mixed up muddled up shook up world" (a world in which "girls will be boys and boys will be girls"), leading to 1970s glam-and-glitter androgyny (Gary Glitter, Marc Bolan, David Bowie, the New York Dolls, the whole bunch of alien queens playing "rock 'n' roll with lipstick on," as John Lennon—not the squarest of guys himself, by the way—tagged it). It was a swinging decade that as Patricia Juliana Smith claims in her anthology *The Queer Sixties* (Routledge, 1999), a must-read on the subject—has a "quasi-legendary" status, peopling our imaginations with "icons and iconoclasts," with ghosts that keep haunting us.

All cultural areas were invested by this weird sense of liberated desire and excitement, construing a classless dream society, a wide demimonde gathering lowlife and high society, underground bars and art galleries, youngsters and intellectuals. It was New York critic Susan Sontag who, in a seminal essay published forty years ago in the *Partisan Review,* named this cultural scenario relishing surface and artifice, the bizarre and quaint, self-contradiction and evanescence, replicas and had taste, irony and aristocratic detachment, "laughing with" rather than "laughing at" marginality: that scenario was *camp*. As a matter of fact, she was employing an old word, emerging from the late nineteenth-century queer underworld of theatricals, tramps, and crooks, circulating in the world of high fashion and literary connoisseurs, and representing the bulk of homosexual subculture of the first half of the twentieth century. And yet, it was a word that all of a sudden might be employed to describe a whole zeitgeist. That word might be used to describe the triumph of style over content, an apology of failed seriousness, the so-bad-it's-good identity as role-playing and the world as a stage (and as such, a most appropriate setting for pop spies). Both in the United States and in Great Britain, mass media immediately seized upon that naughty monosyllable: the *New Statesman, Time, Holiday, Art News,* the *New York Tim&s* Ala *çazine,* the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *New Yorker* hosted pieces on the "new sensational taste." Camp was so much a marketable as to gain the front cover of an *Observer* color supplement issue in 1955, and to he used as a catchphrase for a furniture sale advertisement in

the *New York Times*. Unsurprisingly, Sontag immediately became a media celebrity herself, “the Camp Girl,” an icon of the cultural turmoil and excitement touching all areas of social life. She became a foremost spy figure of the anti-intellectual mid-sixties, a time when, all of a sudden, the world just looked different. It looked definitely queer, and what's most important, it seemed a much nicer place to live in.

The establishment being under patent siege, squares had to resort to their heroes, most notably the greatest spy of all time, Sir James Bond, setting new standards of genre *and* gender for years to come. Mr. Double-O-Seven took up his film career in 1962 with *Dr. No,* opening a series of striking successes as secret agent and as cash maker. He presented a world in which boys will be boys (reaffirming male gaze and dominance) and girls will be girls (gorgeous playthings that, as much as they may nurture criminal plots, *do love* being mastered). He spectacularly tamed the Soviet secret service of SMERSH, the corporate crime of SPECTRE, and an amazing number of villains embodying the specters of miscegenation (in *Dr. No)* and lesbianism, which he managed either to arrest (that's the fate of Rosa Klebb in *From Russia, with Love)* or to redeem (as with lovely superdyke Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger*. who ends up in Bond's lofty and lusty heterosexual embrace). The mid-sixties were the age of pop camp as much as of James Bond, who seemed to offer a powerful affirmation of white, male, bourgeois, Euro-American values, and a role model that straights might identify with—at last!—so as to stop feeling irredeemably out-of-date.

The Bond craze produced many spin-offs, of course, including the popular television series *The Avengers, Mission Impossible,* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.,* staging Bond's allied agents in fighting secret evils spreading around the country. They got help from other paper superheroes, such as Captain America, Superman, and Flash Gordon. The sad truth for squares under siege is that such deployment of forces may not have been so effective, and on two grounds. On the one side, the extraordinary ability of camp to invert values and to pervert codes turned the establishment's not-so-secret agents into double-crossers. These agents were very much camp themselves, being *sooo* heterosexual, *sooo too-much,* as to enact themselves their own parody. They were all spies or masked agents, in fact, and you know, one should never trust a spy.

On the other side, such normalizing agents immediately gave way to sheer parodies, and to countercultural icons, which of course turned the rules of the Bond game against themselves. Sir James Bond was

the protagonist himself of some queer adventures in *Casino Royale,* the only unofficial film production of the very first Fleming novel, in which the proliferation of Bond look-alikes is staged *literally* (all secret agents being renamed after the original superspy, who unwillingly gives up his retirement in order to save the honor of Her Majesty's Secret Service by guiding his own replicas to a feast of parody). He got into double gaming and cross-dressing in Cyril Connolly's lovely 1963 short story, “Bond Strikes Camp,” which brings 007 to a mission in drag in a gay bar (he's to act as “Gerda Blond") only to find out that Miss Moneypenny is a dyke into leather and that “M” has devised the whole plot in order to seduce him ("I am sorry, James. It was the only way I could get you"). Parodies of the straight spy (whatever that may mean) or superhero narratives abound, from mainstream classics—Joseph Losey's *Modesty Blaise* (1966), based upon Peter O'Donnell's comic strip and books, Roger Vadim's sexy fantasy *Barbarella* (1968), the *Batman* television series and the movie released in 1966, starring Adam West and bringing the caped crusader and his oh-my-goodness young companion to mass double-entendre consumption—to underground pieces such as Andy Warhol's 1964 *Bat-man Dracula* the “Harry Chess” (i.e., “the Man from A.U.N.T.I.E.") comic strip published in *Drum* magazine in 1965, and *Spy on the Fly* (one of the counter-Hollywood amateur productions of the Gay Girls Riding Club), bringing secret agent 0069 to a beauty salon where, after reading a *Payboy* magazine, he fights a criminal plot (don't ask how he does that, please).

And there was C.A.M.P.'s top agent, leading such bouquet of exquisite, dancing queens. In his own very name he hyped and conflated gender attributes, powerfully mixing feminine ("Jackie") and masculine ("Holmes") stereotypes into the explosive cocktail of a John Holmes-with-a-twist. A flamboyant blond bombshell armed with a cache of skillfully concealed weapons (besides some obvious technology, there are his white poodle Sophie who's in fact trained to kill, and his own amazing body, an irresistible sexpot fit for world records—and I'm not just talking about sports records), he is a first-class expert in gemology, skilled marksman and Bugatti mechanic, a relentless seducer, and a most effective resource when Interpol fails in fighting evil schemes and brutal villains. In the three novelettes you'll find in this volume, for instance, Jackie wins against a gay diamond counterfeiting ring, a band of midget outlaws who dress up as Santa Claus in order to purloin diamonds from stores, and an international kidnapping ring that brings him from Los Angeles to Tijuana on to Lisbon.

If compared to mainstream parodic heroes, he was possibly less

universally known, true, but certainly of equal if not superior momentum. Not only because he was gay and proud of it before it was plausible, or because he was advocating what in academic jargon might be called "second-wave feminist theory" at a time when first-wave feminism was getting on the move. His adventures, as a matter of fact, were read by an impressive number of people, and what's most, they are still read in outworn copies, remnant to the mass production of the years 1966-1968, and most valuable collector's copies. So, he was and still is quite active as a spy figure. His lower visibility may be taken as part of his being a superspy, as obviously, a good spy is one whose deeds take place *behind the scenes.* (Need an example? In case you don't know it yet, you may understand the 1960s pop scene much better by learning that the Beatles' manager, the one who crafted their image, was in fact a closeted queen.) Well, there are rumors that when the Stonewall riots took place in New York, in June 1969, boosting the gay struggle for civil rights, Jackie Holmes and his secret agency were also there to mourn Judy Garland, and did not miss the chance to hit and fight for a world of justice and freedom. As such, the *Man from C.A.M.P.* books are certainly period pieces, but not just like many other things—greeting cards, magnets, Bakelite goods, etc.—that may be recovered from our mythological past to add the glamour and emotional gratification of campy "moral twilight" to our furniture and bookshelves. Victor Banis' serial spy hero is in fact a most powerful sign of the times (he is, in other words, a *spy* as 'clue," "trace," or "peephole"), a ghost constantly materializing in pulp postcards and in essays on the U.S. 1960s, and now, nearly forty years after his debut, back to a new edition that will introduce him to a whole new generation of readers.

Camp and its dotted, capitalized version we are introduced to behind the debris of the Round Up bar when we first meet Jackie Holmes, share the very same kismet, and telltale sign value. When Jackie's books disappeared from the market, camp also languished, banned by 1970s gay activists as belonging to the self-stigmatization of pre-Stonewall queer culture. The mid-sixties camp craze was dismissed as a vulgar co-optation enacted by the dominant culture's "tasting it": by making it into a style, straights turned it into something fashionable and inoffensive ("it's so *cute!"),* as they effaced its homosexual *raison d'être.* Just like C.A.M.P. was a secret organization that helped homosexuals survive until the world would become a more just and fair place, historical camp might be seen as a survival strategy, a twin of what soul represented for African Americans, a peculiarly homosexual vernacular and way of coping with a bitter reality of hatred and scorn: as such, at best it doomed those who indulged in its

lavishness to self-ghettoing.

More recent years, however, have seen a revival of camp, in both queer activist practices and critical thinking. At stake right now are its history, definition, and politics. Camp has variously been framed as "style," "taste," "sensibility," "aesthetic," or "cultural economy," as self-derogatory or subversive strategy for the gay community. As such, camp is a quite problematic (and nevertheless central) element of our cultural history, a slippery, enigmatic, contradictory issue that may only be defined by adopting a metaphor, such as the diamond metaphor I deployed in my book, *Camp.' Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* (Edinburgh University Press/University of Michigan Press, 1999). The diamond image, in fact, brings forth the quintessence of camp, its preciousness and instability, the value of diamonds being in the beams and figments produced in reflection and refraction on their multifaceted surface. It's worth noting that in her superb graphic guide, *Queer Pulp* (Chronicle Books, 2001), Susan Stryker writes that the jewel-encrusted statuette everybody runs after in Dashiell Hammer's *The Maltese Falcon* is "pulp literature's most potent symbol of the process through which projected fantasies become concrete and circulate endlessly through the pathways of deferred desire." If such is the value of the pulp diamond, and if the diamond image best describes the multi-layered complexity of camp, it is quite significant that Jackie's exploits began by crushing a criminal ring of *fake* diamonds.

In Jackie's stories, in fact, we can trace the whole complexity of camp, of pulp's whirling fantasy world, and the whole ambiguity of the Sixties revolution itself. These are all stories in which Interpol relies upon C.A.M.P. to fight enemies it fails to understand. Stories in which heterosexuality relies upon camp to police its alterity. So, albeit unwillingly, Jackie Holmes may have been working for heterosexual institutions, after all; just like camp, according to some critics, helped integrate homosexual subculture into straight society, by selling gay identity on the co-optation market. And yet, Jackie's stories are also stories of relentless seduction, for he inexorably manages to penetrate all straight agents that Interpol couples him with. In a way, Jackie is just like Lola, the queen of the Kinks' "mixed up muddled up shook up world," appearing just a few years before the Kinks sang her epics of seduction ("Well I'm not the world's most masculine man, but I know what I am and I'm glad I'm a man, and so is Lola"). Was he building a bridge between heterosexuality and homosexuality? Was he promoting pan- or bisexuality? Was he—as David Bergman states in his excellent contribution to Patricia Juliana Smith's *The Queer* Sixties —really building a sense of gay community? Was he infiltrating and

destabilizing straight culture, or was he really acting as a plaything, policing boundaries, for dominant culture? Just like all of the 1960s spies, was he possibly double-crossing, triple-crossing, or what?

Oh well. The politics of C.A.M.P. and of its top agent may not be clear, just like the schemes of camp will remain irreducibly duplicitous. All said and done, what can you expect from a secret agent, if not ambiguity? Certainly, you shouldn't look for clear and straight politics, when spies are at stake. But there's one thing that is quite clear. C.A.M.P., Jackie Holmes, and the whole horde of characters we meet in these novelettes, are *outrageous!)* funny, even today. It may well be that we deserve such class of excitement—in academia as well as in the real world now even more than when they were brought to life. Yes, it is high time we take leave of campy academic jabber, and just indulge ourselves in his gaudy, exhilarating, priceless adventures.

Fabio Cleto

February 2004

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Author's note

The books in the *Man from C.A.M.P.* series were not intended to be literary masterworks. They were literally written off the top of the head, in no more than four or five days each; there were no second thoughts or second drafts, no revisions, no polishing up of syntax. The plots were sometimes incomprehensible, the prose convoluted, and the sex scenes—well, hot gay sex scenes were something new for us in 1965, so I think I can be forgiven if they were a bit overblown.

When the idea of reissuing these books came up then the question arose, should they be rewritten, polished up? It seemed to me, though, that these books deserved to be reread—if at all—in authentic form.

However, some changes had to be made. “As written” and “as published” were not the same thing. The original manuscripts of the first several books were too short to meet the publisher's requirements and as I was unavailable at that time to lengthen them, the editors padded the books out to bring them up to the needed length. Sometimes they lifted material from one book to the *next—Color Him Gay,* for example (not included in this volume), has an entire chapter borrowed from *The Man from C.A.M.P.—and* sometimes they wrote in new material, mostly jarringly heterosexual sex scenes. Because that padding is not needed here, I have made the decision to delete this material.

There were also some blatant mistakes for which I can blame nobody but myself. Sometimes even I couldn't guess who was speaking, “down” sometimes came out “up,” and poor Sophie, Jackie's killer poodle, changed gender from one paragraph to the next. I have corrected the most egregious of these errors for clarity's sake.

With those few exceptions, however, the hooks are as they were originally written and intended to be published, bad syntax and all. They were a young man's fledgling efforts, meant only to be fun, and I can only hope you will forgive their flaws. *Pace, t'imploro.*

It would take a far larger volume than this one to list all the people in my long life to whom I am grateful, starting with my family, whose love and support I have enjoyed without luckily for me quite having to deserve them.

There are people, however, whose contributions to this particular project cannot go unmentioned.

It was Todd Clark who took me almost literally by the hand and led me back to my writing past, and so could be said to have put all of this into motion.

Bruce Brown has always provided the kind of unfailing encouragement that can see a writer through those days of flagging confidence, when the words won't come and you are convinced that you are guilty of wasting time and perhaps crimes against nature.

When these aged books proved too fragile and faded to be successfully scanned, Margaret Weadick, Bob Salvatoricllo, Jack Garceau, and Steve Freitag took up the laborious task of typing them onto disks. David McTarnahan typed too, but more importantly helped this low-tech writer make his way through the mysterious maze of computers.

Thanks are due to Alan Sinfield, Richard Dyer, John De Cecco, and Thomas Long who pointed us along the path that led eventually to Bill Palmer at The Haworth Press, and I am certainly grateful to Bill

Palmer for his confidence in these books.

Of course, I owe special thanks to Dr. Fabio Cleto, one of the true authorities on the camp phenomena, who first conceived the idea of reissuing the series. I thought at the time he must be crazy, but he went on most generously to shepherd this project through to publication, for which craziness I am again deeply grateful.

Most of all, however, I have to thank Jackie Holmes for making me laugh, then and now. The truth is, these were his stories and I am fortunate and grateful that he shared them with me. What a camp!

And finally, I want to thank all those little people, sitting out there in the dark, watching ... oh, wait, that's a different fantasy, isn't it?

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The Man from C.A.M.P.

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Chapter 1

The bar did not, at first sight, offer a very appealing picture. Not even the dimness of the lights, which left the interior in near darkness, could manage to lend any sort of charm to the battered counter or the stools with torn plastic hanging loose. The floor was covered with sawdust and debris of various sorts.

The customers, too, might have been described as debris. Some bars catering to homosexuals employ a certain discretion, and that discretion is often imitated by the customers. Neither The Round Up nor its patrons could have been given credit for such thoughtfulness. The photos pinned to the walls, pictures of nearly nude young men, mostly bodybuilders, identified the bar for what it was, a gay hangout. The patrons were as easily identified.

If the two men who had just entered found the bar and its customers peculiar, they themselves were regarded as not less peculiar by the inhabitants of the room. Not that they were particularly odd themselves; rather, it was their air of normality that made them seem out of place in The Round Up. Neither of them gave any indication of being homosexual or “on the prowl.” It might have been that they were police—they had an official air about them but the patrons of The Round Up were quite familiar with the more devious tactics employed by the vice squad of the local police. This was too open an approach, and that possibility was quickly dismissed.

The two stood inside the door for a few minutes, allowing their eyes to adjust to the dim light. Of the pair, it was the one trailing behind who aroused the most interest on the part of the people at the bar. Ted Summers was the proverbial tall, dark, and handsome. Not quite forty, he offered an appearance that was a confusing and attractive combination of age and youth. His unruly hair, once jet black, was now flecked with gray, and his face had a tan, leathery quality that evidenced the fact that he had been around a bit. He had, in fact, been around a lot, and his years had been action filled, first as a heroic young marine who had come back from the service sporting numerous medals and later as a rugged, highly regarded investigator for the U.S. Treasury Department. His body, however, was the same body that had belonged to the young marine. Tall and powerfully built, be was every inch a man's man, easily a match for any of the muscle boys whose

photos were displayed on the walls.

His companion, on the other hand, might have been taken for an accounting clerk in some small office. Lou Upton was only a few years older than Ted, but he was already balding and showing a tendency toward fatness, especially around the waist. He was not, never had been, the perfect physical specimen. But behind the quick gray eyes, exaggerated by the thickness of his glasses, was the mind of a top-notch policeman, a representative of the world police organization, Interpol.

With a nod toward his companion, Upton led the way to one of the booths that lined one wall. They seated themselves and sat in silence until the pimply-faced bartender had taken their order and returned with two beers. By this time the newness of their arrival had begun to wear off and the others in the bar were losing interest, returning their attention to one another.

"Seems like a funny place to contact an agent," Summers said in a low voice, sniffing as he glanced around the room

"Jackie's an unusual agent," Upton answered him, downing a healthy mouthful of his beer.

"Who is she, anyway?" Summers wanted to know. "One of your people?"

"You'll find out in plenty of time."

Summers frowned at the answer. "I don't think I like this whole setup. Hell, I've been with the force long enough to be filled in on details. I don't like being treated like a security risk."

"I didn't know you were being treated as such," Upton argued.

"I'd say so. No one's told me the first thing about this except to tag along with you. I don't know what we're working on or who this Jackie is, or anything else."

"You'll find out," Upton assured him. "In..."

"In due time," Summers finished, with another frown.

They fell silent again, drinking their beers and occasionally glancing around at the growing crowd of homosexuals. With few exceptions they were all the loud, flamboyant type known among their own

people as “swishy.” Summers continued to feel uncomfortable. He had known one or two homosexuals in his day who had been all right guys, but they had been the careful type, the ones you could never identify. These people were something different. He instinctively leaned away each time one of them passed near where he was sitting, as though afraid of contamination.

Upton, on the other hand, seemed quite unperturbed by the setting or the people around them. He smiled from time to time, more to himself than to anyone else, as though he were enjoying some private joke.

They finished their beers and Upton signaled the waiter to bring them two more. Summers looked at his watch impatiently.

"She's late, isn't she?” he said aloud. “I thought we were to meet her at ten and it's after ten-thirty now.

"Jackie will be here,” Upton promised him, still quite patient himself. “When the right moment comes, contact will be made."

As the minutes passed Summers began to have doubts about Upton's statement. In his field of work delays usually meant trouble.

It was eleven by the time he finished the second beer, and still there had been no attempt at making contact.

"I've got to go unload some of the beer,” Summers said, standing. “Never could hold that stuff very well."

"I'll save your seat,” Upton answered, with another of his puzzling smiles.

Summers edged his way through the Saturday-night crowd that was beginning to fill up the bar, heading for the rear. Beyond a dingy curtain was a narrow hall with doors opening into the Ladies’ and Men's rooms. He smiled to himself as he passed the door marked Ladies, wondering which of the customers at the bar used that door, and entered the other.

He had just stood up to the urinal when the door opened behind him and an effeminate blond stepped up beside him. For a moment Summers ignored the newcomer, thinking instead about the mysterious Jackie whom they should have met an hour ago.

He was suddenly aware of the fact that he was being stared at. He glanced angrily sideways. The blond, short and slender, was looking

him over brazenly, an irritating smile playing upon his lips.

"Nice," he said simply, raising his eyes to wink at Summers.

"Knock it off," Summers snapped angrily, stepping back.

"Don't turn away, Mr. Summers," the blond told him quietly. "It gives us a good excuse to stand here and talk."

Summers froze instinctively, despite his rather awkward position. "You know my name?" he asked, staring in surprise at the still smiling homosexual.

"I know quite a bit about you," the blond assured him. He glanced meaningfully downward as he added, "Although they left the nicest things out of the report."

Summers blushed and stepped back to the urinal, leaning close against it to prevent any possible observation of his endowments. "But who the hell...?" He stopped in mid sentence and his jaw fell open. "Oh, no, you can't be..."

The blond nodded. "Umm-hm, I'm Jackie."

Summers groaned and rolled his eyes heavenward. It was fast becoming evident that he wasn't going to like this assignment at all.

"Do we have to stand here like this?" Summers asked. Standing at a urinal with a homosexual beside him was proving to be disquieting. "It's sort of a peculiar way to make contact."

"It's a rather good way, as a matter of fact," Jackie informed him, clearly deriving more enjoyment from the situation than Summers was. "We could stand here for hours without raising suspicion. If anyone comes in they'll only assume we're cruising one another."

"Cruising?"

"Flirting which isn't a bad idea at all. Do you have to stand so close against that thing?"

"I'm holding myself up," Summers told him sarcastically. "My legs are weak."

"I've been told I do that to men," Jackie said with a shrug. "Oh, well, how much do you know?"

"Not a damned thing. And I can see now why Lou didn't want to give me any details." At the moment, Summers could happily have strangled the man in the other room.

"Don't tell me you're the sort who hates fairies?" Jackie asked with obvious enjoyment.

"They're all right in their place," Summers snapped. "I've just never shared that place."

"Pity," Jackie decided, growing more sober. "I guess we may as well get with Upton and see what he has on his mind."

With relief Summers hurriedly ended his exposure and stepped back. "I'll go get him," he offered quickly.

"That won't be necessary. He's being picked up right now, as a matter of fact."

"What makes you think Upton's going to let himself be picked up by a homosexual?" Summers wanted to know.

Jackie smiled again. "You don't know Sandy. He always gets what he goes after."

"Anyway, you don't mean to tell me the three of us are going to stand in here and talk. Or will people just think we're having an orgy?" His sarcasm was evident.

For an answer Jackie crooked a finger. "Come with me," he said, leading the way toward the stalls provided in the rest room. The far most one displayed a large "out of order" sign on the door. Ignoring that, Jackie pushed open the door, holding it with his foot. As Summers watched suspiciously, Jackie nonchalantly pulled aside the ceramic top of the water closet and plunged his hand inside. He felt about for a moment; there was a click and a whir of gears as the end wall swung open.

Wide-eyed with amazement, Summers followed him through the opening. The wall closed behind them, leaving them momentarily in darkness.

"I can't see a thing," he growled.

"If you're frightened, you can hold my hand," Jackie informed him. Summers chose to ignore the remark.

A moment later another door opened. Summers followed Jackie inside to find himself in a luxurious apartment. Crystal chandeliers glittered overhead and candles cast flickering shadows on velvet-covered walls. Twin sofas covered in pale charmeuse flanked a fireplace in which a fire was burning low.

"Make yourself comfortable," Jackie suggested, indicating one of the sofas. "Cognac?"

"Sounds good." Summers seated himself, staring around the room in awe. "Quite a place. You live here?"

"Not exactly." Jackie returned to hand him the cognac in a large balloon glass. He glanced wistfully at the spot next to Summers, then seated himself discreetly on the facing sofa. "It's one of the offices of

"C.A.M.P."

"What in the hell is C.A.M.P.?"

Jackie cocked one eyebrow. "You are in the dark, aren't you? Well, without going into all the details, it's an underground organization dedicated to the protection and advancement of homosexuals."

Summers sat forward on the sofa. "Good God, don't tell me I'm being assigned to protect a bunch of fairies?"

Jackie continued to smile, but his voice turned ice cold. "Don't you think we're entitled to protection?" he asked sharply.

Summers was spared the necessity of a reply. The door through which they had entered the apartment swung open, and another of the homosexuals who had been seated at the bar entered, followed by a grinning Lou Upton.

"Well, I see you passed the test," Upton greeted Summers cheerfully.

"Thanks for all the advance warning," Summers growled in annoyance.

Upton shrugged. "I couldn't let you know the score. You might have balked at the assignment. Anyway, Jackie wanted to look you over before he agreed to talk with us."

"He looked me over all right," Summers answered, still ruffled. "Don't tell me you're a member of the club I've been hearing about?"

"C.A.M.P.?" Upton laughed aloud. “No, C.A.M.P.'s an independent organization, so far as I know, not connected with any government or any other police outfit. I contacted them on this case because I thought they might be able to give us some help."

The homosexual who had brought Upton into the apartment left quietly the same way he had come, but yet another stranger entered the room through a door on the opposite wall. This one, Summers thought as he glanced up, would never be pegged as a homosexual. A football player, maybe, or something in that vein. He was tall, easily six foot five inches, and built like a bull, handsome in a rugged, brutish way.

"That's Rich,” Jackie explained without glancing at the newcomer. “He keeps an eye on this place."

"And you?” Upton asked.

"And me,” Jackie agreed with a grin. “Like the song says, it's nice to have a man around the house. Of course, I'm really living it up tonight."

"What's about this case?” Summers asked, impatient to steer the conversation away from a distasteful subject and back to business.

For an answer, Upton removed a diminutive black pouch from his pocket and handed it to Jackie. “This is the problem."

Summers leaned forward to see. Jackie opened the pouch and rolled a brilliant diamond of impressive size into the palm of his hand. He rolled it about, holding it up to the light once or twice. The stone caught the light and reflected it in a rainbow of shimmering color.

"If this is your problem,” Jackie decided, “I'll be only too happy to take it off your hands. That's as fine a diamond as I've ever seen."

"Is it?” Upton asked him calmly. “Here, take a look through the glass.” He took a jeweler's glass from his pocket and handed that to Jackie as well.

Jackie studied the stone again. “Still looks fine to me,” he insisted. “I'd say it's a perfect stone."

Upton leaned back in his seat with a smug expression. “You'd certainly think so to look at it. And most of the world's experts would have said the same thing. As a matter of fact, however, it's a counterfeit."

"A counterfeit?" Jackie looked amazed and even dubious. Though it was not something he was wont to brag about, he was one of the world's experts on diamonds, having taken top honors at the World Diamond Institute in South Africa.

"Exactly," Upton assured him with a nod. "It's the most fantastic duplication ever seen, a chemical formula so perfect that it fools even the experts. We've been working on it for months now and still haven't managed to break down the formula, although we're getting pretty close."

"If it's so perfect," Summers interjected, "how was it ever spotted in the first place?"

"Good question," Jackie agreed.

Upton took a second pouch from his pocket and handed that to Jackie. Jackie removed another stone, equally as large as the first, from the pouch. He examined it carefully for a moment, scowling. Then, leaning forward, he tapped it lightly on the tile hearth before the fireplace. The gem shattered and fell apart in numerous pieces.

"It's a flaw in the formula," Upton explained. "The stone begins deteriorating almost at once. A month ago, that stone was as perfect a counterfeit as the first one.

"Just long enough for someone to make himself a bundle of cash," Jackie murmured, fingering the pieces of shattered stone thoughtfully.

"And someone has been doing just that," Upton told him. "Those stones are turning up all over Europe pawned in jewelry, sold directly to the diamond merchants this is not just one individual at work but a highly organized ring, efficient and dangerous."

"It could knock the bottom right out of the diamond market," Jackie said. "The ripple effect could wreak havoc with the world economy."

"Any leads?" Summers asked. The case at last was beginning to sound interesting. He liked big assignments, particularly those that promised a lot of excitement and danger.

"Not much," Upton admitted with a sigh. "We have reason to believe that the stuff's originating here in America, probably in this general area. It's a matter of the availability of certain chemicals used in the formula and a few other details."

"It's very fascinating," Jackie stated, returning the stones to their pouches and handing them back to Upton. "But it sounds like it's ready-made for you two boys. I don't see where C.A.M.P. fits into the picture."

Upton's face grew grim as he met Jackie's gaze evenly. "We also have reason to believe," he went on, "that this organization is a homosexual one."

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Chapter 2

Rich, the silent bodyguard, had remained in the room, seating himself inconspicuously nearby. He leaned forward now, following the conversation intently, and the movement caused Summers to glance in his direction.

His first impression had been one of all brawn and no brains. Summers realized suddenly that his impression had been only a deliberately created illusion. The man had been silently attentive to all that had been said, and now, unaware that he had been noticed, the blank expression on his face had been replaced by one of keen intelligence. C.A.M.P., Summers decided, was beginning to look like a rather impressive organization.

Jackie, too, had become suddenly more interested. His affectations and flamboyant mannerisms had been discarded in favor of a serious and businesslike attitude. “What makes you think there are homosexuals involved?” Jackie asked bluntly.

Upton stood, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets and pacing the room as he spoke. “Like I said, this is a dangerous outfit. I'll be very blunt with both of you—we've already lost two agents, both very sharp men; one of them in London, the other right here in Los Angeles.” He paused as though weighing what he was going to say next. “Both of them,” he went on, speaking cautiously, “were found to have picked up a venereal disease during the time of their investigations."

"That certainly indicates homosexuals,” Summers said without thinking. “They're notorious for spreading diseases."

Jackie gave him a cold look. “Maybe,” he said, looking back at Upton. “But I've heard reports that some women also carry germs.

Upton shook his head. “At least one of them got his from a male partner. The back way."

"Even granting that it came from a male partner,” Jackie argued, “it still might mean nothing. Some men like to play around with a young boy from time to time. Maybe your agent was just having himself some fun.” It was Summers's turn to scowl.

"I knew both of these agents," Upton continued. "I can assure you neither of them was the type."

Jackie helped himself to a cigarette from the silver chest on the table near him and lit it. "You mean their wrists weren't limp and they didn't lisp," he suggested with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Upton blushed but he stuck to his argument. "Granted, you can't always tell by looking at a man what his sexual appetites might include. But I'm sure this man wasn't the sort to hang around a gay bar except for business purposes. He couldn't afford to, for one thing; it could jeopardize his job."

"Homosexuals," Summers explained needlessly and with some malice of his own, "are notoriously bad security risks."

"Aren't you taking quite a chance, passing on all this information to me?" Jackie wanted to know.

"If I thought that," Upton said sincerely, flashing an angry look at Summers, "I wouldn't be here."

"You mentioned a bar," Jackie prompted him. "How do you know about that?"

"He had these on him," Upton answered, tossing Jackie a book of matches.

Jackie looked at the cover. "The Blue Cave—that's a gay spot, all right. Of course none of this is conclusive, but I'll admit it looks like a lead."

"That's where you come in," Upton said. "The U.S. government has assigned me and Summers to work on the case locally, but we need someone who knows the world of the homosexual and can move about freely in it. That's why I contacted C.A.M.P."

Jackie turned the matches over in his hand. "Why should C.A.M.P. be interested? Our work is the protection and advancement of homosexuals. Granted there are homosexuals involved in this matter, but I don't see that it will further our goals in any way."

"Several important diamond merchants have joined together to put up a sizable fee—half a million dollars, in fact—if you'll work with us on the case."

"That's impressive," Jackie said, without appearing particularly impressed. He glanced in Summers's direction, his eyes moving slowly up and down the long, manly body. "Of course," he added with a smile, "there are other rewards that would appeal to me more."

Summers blushed scarlet and hastily crossed his legs. "Forget it," he said firmly, "I don't go your route."

"That's what they all say," Jackie answered him pleasantly. "At first."

Upton was struggling to suppress a smile. "What do you think?" he asked Jackie.

To Summers's further discomfort and annoyance, Jackie was still staring at the noticeable fit of the front of Summers's trousers. "I think it might be worthwhile," Jackie decided in a quiet voice.

"The only reward you'll get is the money," Summers informed him coldly, shifting his position again in an attempt to discourage the observation.

Jackie smiled and left the statement unchallenged, returning his attention to Upton. "I'll start on it right away," he said, standing.

Summers and Rich stood also, Summers grateful to have the conversation hack to business again. "Where do we start?" he asked Jackie.

"If we're going to work together we'll need some cover," Jackie told him, efficient and businesslike again. "I'm known in most of the bars around town, not of course as an agent of C.A.M.P., just as a rather wild homosexual. I can't just start towing you around without making it look legitimate. I'm afraid you're going to have to become my new trick."

Summers shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "So long as it's only pretending," he answered.

"There's a bar in Hollywood called The Golden Calf. Be there tomorrow night, about nine. I'll make a big thing about picking you up and then showing you off around town. After that no one will question our being together."

"Anything in particular I should wear?" Summers asked. Jackie giggled. "Not all of us wear earrings and ballet slippers, if that's what you're contemplating. Just something casual and masculine. I'm sure

you have something in your wardrobe to fit that description."

"I'll leave you two free to work this out alone," Upton said. "You both know how to contact me if you need anything, and needless to say our full forces will be at your disposal."

A few minutes later Upton and Summers left through the stall in the rest room, going out one at a time. The hallway outside the rest room also led to a rear door that opened into an alley, and they left by that route rather than going back through the bar.

"Tell me," Summers said when they were finally in the car, "have you worked with this Jackie character before?"

"A couple of times," Upton answered.

"Well, did he," Summers stammered with embarrassment. "Did he make passes like that at you?"

"Jackie makes passes at everyone male," Upton informed him with amusement.

"What did you do? I mean, how did you handle him?"

Upton gave him a sideways glance that was amused but otherwise uninformative. "You've been in this business long enough," he said calmly, "to know that an agent never discusses his cases."

Summers leaned back in his seat and decided against pursuing the conversation any further.

* * * *

In the apartment that the agents had just left, Jackie kicked off his shoes and curled his feet up under him on the sofa. "What do you think?" he asked of Rich, who had cleared away the glasses and emptied the ashtrays.

Rich came to stand behind the sofa. He began to massage Jackie's shoulders with his massive hands. "Sounds dangerous to me," he said.

Jackie grunted his pleasure and twisted his shoulders beneath the soothing hands. "I've handled them just as dangerous before."

"I know. And I always spend my time wondering when someone's going to break that pretty little neck of yours."

Jackie smiled up at him, grateful for the concern. “You worry too much,” he said.

Rich was thoughtful for a moment. ‘We could both give up this business,” he said finally. “C.A.M.P. has plenty of people to fill our places."

"There's never enough first-class people,” Jackie said patiently. “And we're both first class. Besides, let's face it, we've been at it too long, it's in our blood."

"I guess you're right,” Rich conceded. “But we could slow down a bit, You and I could settle down and only work on a case from time to time."

"As lovers?” Jackie asked.

"You know how I feel about you,” Rich insisted.

"And I'm fond of you, too,” Jackie said, patting one of the strong hands tenderly. “But we are what we are, and it just wouldn't work. Think about it for a minute, doll. I use sex as another weapon when I'm working. Tomorrow I may be in bed with someone else, maybe a dozen different men in the next week. Even if you weren't the jealous type, there wouldn't be much left over to keep you satisfied. Besides, you know how I am. Even if my job didn't call for it, I'm always after something new. I like the thrill of fresh conquests."

"Like Summers?” Rich asked without malice.

Jackie smiled and closed his eyes, envisioning Ted Summers's handsome body before him. “Like Ted Summers,” he admitted. “You see, I'd always be too spent to be much good to you."

"I guess you're right,” Rich admitted with a rueful smile.

Jackie glanced up at him with affection. He did care a great deal for this towering figure with whom he had worked closely over the years. “Of course,” he said, his eyes gleaming mischievously, “I'm not spent just now."

Rich's face beamed with happy anticipation. “I've got the time,” he said.

Jackie stood from the sofa, stretching lazily before he led the way through another door into a spacious bedroom dominated by a huge,

canopied bed. He undressed quickly. Efficiency was an essential tool in his work, and although he gave others an impression of indolence and languor, it was only a guise that he wore.

Dressed and at work, as Summers had seen him in the rest room, he appeared a rather weakly, thin homosexual, effeminate and anything but athletic. He was thin and small of build. But the body that he exposed as he stripped off his clothing was far from weak. His daily schedule included strenuous workouts that kept him in top condition, and his body was one of wiry strength, combined with speed and agility. He had once carried Rich's huge body from a burning building down three flights of stairs. He could run with the speed of a gazelle and out-fight opponents twice his own weight. These were abilities, however, that he did not advertise; his appearance of helplessness had served to his advantage countless times and, he was sure, would do so again.

He was already in bed before Rich was finished removing his clothes. Jackie studied the massive body being revealed before his eyes. Rich was a bull of a man, as Summers had decided, and his towering figure was even more impressive naked. Although he moved with lightness and astonishing catlike grace, his limbs bulged with muscles that were not in any way artificial, glaring evidence of his brute strength.

Sexually he was a giant as well, of awesome and even frightening proportions. Jackie knew that his immense size had caused Rich much embarrassment and unhappiness throughout his life; there were few who could appreciate a partner of such endowments. This, perhaps as much as anything else, accounted for the affection Rich felt for his blond friend.

He came to the bed quickly, eagerly. Time was often brief for them, as it was impossible to know when something might interfere. Sex, when intended for their own personal pleasure, was a luxury that neither of them was often able to indulge in.

They embraced ardently, Jackie's diminutive frame all but lost in the huge arms that encircled him. There was an urgency about their actions; yet in this, as in everything else, Jackie was an artist. Not the slightest movement, nor a fraction of a second, was wasted. He was like a musician playing with infinite skill upon a priceless instrument, creating a rhapsody of sensation and joy.

Jackie's mouth moved away from Rich's, making its way slowly, teasingly, across the broad expanse of the chest, thick with hair. Rich's

stomach rolled, rising and falling in an uneven rhythm as Jackie blazed a trail across it, following the direction pointed by the path of black hair that led from his navel down to the V formed by his thighs. There, surrounded by the jungle-like curls, towered the immense symbol of his passion. For Jackie it held no fear, and his mouth set fire to this area of flesh as well.

He returned to Rich's mouth for a long, torrid kiss. He was bent over Rich's prone figure; holding Rich with one hand he lowered himself slowly, carefully, his flesh parting and yielding before the unbending weapon. Rich's hand clasped his hips, guiding him, easing him down.

Jackie moaned softly as the painful pleasure invaded his body. In unison they began to move, Jackie moving downward to meet the thrust of Rich's powerful hips. Rich was powerful and yet so gentle that he might have been half the size Jackie knew him to be. Jackie, too, had felt fear when he had first seen the awesome object of desire, but now he knew that it was an instrument of joy, not agony.

Rich's ardor was growing, his hands kneading Jackie's flesh frantically, his eyes closed, breath rapid and uneven. Still he held back, being careful not to hurt Jackie.

"It's okay," Jackie told him, bending to bite Rich's ear. Rich grabbed him in a fervent embrace, grateful for the assurance. His movements became faster, more furious, each thrust more definite and longer.

"Jackie," he groaned ecstatically. He crushed Jackie to him in a hug that threatened to pulverize Jackie's bones. His body shook and jerked as spasms of relief raced through him.

"Whew," Jackie said when, a few minutes later, Rich had regained his breath. "You were really eager."

"Still am," Rich told him with a grin. "Give me a minute to get cleaned up and I'll show you."

Jackie waited happily on the bed for his return. Sometimes he wondered why he had to have others. Rich, he knew, was more of a man than anything else he could hope to find. He had everything that anyone could want. And yet, wonderful as he was, great as it was with him—it wasn't enough.

Rich returned, dropping quickly to the bed. He caught Jackie in an embrace that showed his ardor was far from cooled. They froze suddenly as a familiar sound reached their cars from elsewhere in the

apartment. It was a soft tinkling music, much like that produced by the wind chimes of the Orient, except that there was no breeze in the apartment.

"High Camp," Jackie said simply, recognizing the signal employed by their headquarters.

"To hell with them," Rich said angrily, reaching for Jackie again.

Jackie gave the naked flesh of his wide buttocks a hard slap. "Better answer it," he insisted, swinging his legs to the floor. "Might be something important."

Still scowling angrily, Rich rose and started from the room. "Better put on a robe," Jackie told him with a grin. "I don't think they'd appreciate your appearing like that on the telescreen."

Rich followed the advice and disappeared through the door that led into the inner office, a room filled with complex equipment of every description, the tools employed in their work.

Jackie dressed quickly; like Rich, he too was disappointed that their session had been interrupted, but it was the sort of occurrence to which he had long since become accustomed. Working for C.A.M.P. was not merely a job, it was a way of life.

"Anything drastic?" he asked as Rich came back into the room.

"The usual," Rich informed him glumly. "But it will keep me busy for a while. I guess that kills any more fun for today."

Jackie put a comforting arm around his waist and they returned to the living room together. "I have lots of things I should be doing anyway," he said. The fake diamonds, which Upton had left with him on departing, were lying on the table, in their pouches.

"Have these run through the lab," he suggested, handing them to Rich. "We may come up with something they haven't noticed."

Before leaving the apartment he slid open a panel in one wall and stepped into a small, darkened stall. In one of its walls was a tiny peephole to which he glued his eye. He was peering into another, similar stall, in which he could see a plainclothes detective sitting. The detective, he knew, was watching the rest room of the bar, a fairly common police practice which allowed them to observe the actions of homosexuals in the place and sometimes make arrests.

Jackie smiled mischievously. He was well aware of the “watchdog” who observed the facilities. He knew also that the view provided by the dummy mirror in the rest room did not include the entrance to this apartment. Sometimes he played games with the watchers, deliberately creating the impression that something was about to happen and then disappearing into the apartment, leaving the detective puzzled and frustrated.

This stall and his peephole had been a whim on his part, unknown, of course, to the police. It amused him to watch the watchers—particularly, he thought briefly, when they were as attractive as the one on duty just now.

With a sigh he left the stall, blowing a kiss to Rich as he went out of the apartment. Another time he would have lingered in the rest room to arouse the curiosity and interest of the detective beyond the mirror. This time, however, he stooped down, after assuring himself that there was no one in the room, and crossed the room safely below the mirror. He did not stand until he was at the door, again out of range.

'Time for work,” he told himself, using the back door out of the bar.

* * * *

Shortly before nine o'clock the following evening, Ted Summers entered The Golden Calf, the bar in Hollywood which Jackie had suggested as their “pick up” spot. He had resisted the temptation to don the tight Levi's and formfitting shirts often associated with homosexuals and had instead dressed conservatively and, he hoped, inconspicuously. The gray trousers fitted nicely to his lean hips without being ludicrously tight and successfully conveyed the impression that the body beneath was worth seeing more of. An old college sweater and a pair of loafers completed the outfit except for a corduroy jacket he wore against the chill of the evening.

His entrance attracted some attention, but it was the sort of attention that assured him he was welcome in the place. Several patrons gave him more than passing glances as he approached the bar and ordered a beer. One of them gave him a warm smile and raised an eyebrow quizzically. Summers forced a smile to his lips and shook his head.

The Golden Calf, although far from plush, was a considerably nicer bar than The Round Up. The floor at least was carpeted and the walls sported some rather gaudy gilt-framed mirrors. The atmosphere however was the same furtive, watchful one common to such places.

Summers leaned against the bar and glanced about, seeing no sign of Jackie. He could only hope that Jackie was not as late as the last time. This was not his idea of a swell place to spend an evening. Of course, he reminded himself unhappily, he would probably he spending quite a bit of time in such places while he worked on this assignment.

Might as well get with it, he told himself with resignation. He answered the smile of yet another patron. This one, an aging homosexual, was sufficiently encouraged to come up to him.

"Lonesome?" the stranger asked, standing much too close for Summers's comfort.

"Just waiting for a friend," Summers informed him, remembering to seem friendly.

"Too bad." The other looked him up and down with a hungry eye. Summers felt a quick chill as his clothes were figuratively stripped from his body. "You're new in here, aren't you?" the stranger pursued, undaunted by the threat of an arriving friend.

"New in town," Summers admitted truthfully. "I heard this was a swinging place."

"It's dull tonight," his new friend told him with a grimace. "You're the first interesting thing to walk in. Sure you're tied up?"

Summers shrugged. "Maybe my friend won't show up," he said.

The jukebox, which had been playing nearby, ended its record and for a moment there was comparative quiet. From outside came a sudden loud screech that sounded like a battleship being dragged across dry steel, accompanied by a rather hair-raising roar.

"Oh, God," the homosexual muttered, lifting his eyes heavenward, "Jackie's here."

Summers nearly laughed aloud. Jackie, it seemed, had not exaggerated when he said he was known about the town, although it was hard to imagine how the racket from outside, which had come to an abrupt stop, signaled the arrival of Jackie.

"Jackie?" he asked innocently.

"You don't know Jackie? Heavens, you are new to town. I thought they knew that faggot from one coast to the other."

"Sounds interesting," Summers said dryly. It wasn't enough that he had to work on the case with a homosexual, but it had to be one with a national reputation.

"He's wild; that's all I can say."

The draperies that covered the doorway parted suddenly and Jackie burst into the room. Even having met Jackie before, Summers was not quite prepared for the sight. The small blond wore a pair of white pants that might have passed for leotards they were so closely fitted to his body. His shirt, visible beneath his jacket, was a blinding scarlet affair of embroidered silk. Over this striking ensemble he had worn a car-length coat that appeared to be white kid. Gleaming patent leather boots completed the effect of wild flamboyance.

"Hello, Jackie," someone called from the rear of the bar.

"Hello, darlings," Jackie greeted everyone present with one grand gesture. "I just couldn't stay away from you another minute."

Several of the homosexuals came forward to greet Jackie, gathering loosely about him. In their midst Jackie seemed to be holding court, chattering quickly with all of them at once. Summers watched the show with a fake grin attached to his face.

Jackie looked around finally and saw him. "My God!" he screamed loudly. "A man! Freddie, where on earth did you capture that lovely creature?"

Summers blushed as all eyes turned toward him. At the moment he could very easily have wrung Jackie's slim neck.

Summers's companion smiled begrudgingly, although he was clearly not happy at the prospect of losing his new find to Jackie. "I was just warning him about you," he called back to Jackie.

"Bitch," Jackie snapped. He descended upon them, glowering viciously at Freddie and showering dazzling smiles on Summers.

"Pay no mind to anything that one's told you," Jackie informed him, dismissing Freddie with a regal wave of his hand. "At heart I'm very sweet."

"It's surrounded by a hard shell of evil," Freddie commented dryly.

"Away!" Jackie shouted, pointing a finger dramatically toward the

other end of the bar. “I'm at work."

To Summers's surprise, Freddie moved obediently away, although he continued to give them disgruntled glances.

Having taken the field, Jackie returned his attention to Summers. “Whose little boy are you?” he asked in an affected baby voice.

"I thought I knew,” Summers replied, hoping that he sounded convincingly flirtatious despite his irritation, “until you came in."

Jackie howled with laughter. “He loves me!” he shrieked to the amusement of the others in the bar. “Oh, I've looked for you all my life. Have you ever been to Paris?"

"Paris?” Summers was astonished by this abrupt question. “No, why?"

"We'll go tonight,” Jackie informed him, grabbing his arm firmly. “Come, fly away with me."

Deciding to have a little fun himself, Summers pulled his arm firmly away from the grasp. “I don't think so,” he said. “Paris sounds awfully dull to me."

Far from being thrown by the tactic, Jackie only grabbed him again. “Oh, how wonderful, I love coy men. We'll go to Rome then, or Madrid—anywhere you wish."

"Maybe I want to stay right here,” Summers answered, seating himself on a bar stool with a malicious grin. He was curious to see how Jackie would handle the situation if things didn't go as easily as he had planned.

"Fine,” Jackie declared. Before Summers could protest, Jackie was seated on his lap, one arm about his neck.

"You're very persuasive,” Summers admitted, gritting his teeth and smiling, although it was an effort. “But how about taking me someplace closer, like your apartment?"

"Tut, tut,” Jackie clucked, tweaking his ear playfully. “Now who's impatient? I've decided I agree with you, it's quite nice here just like this."

Summers stood up so suddenly that Jackie nearly tumbled to the floor. “Come on, doll,” he said aloud. “I'm bored with this place."

Grinning smugly, Jackie allowed himself to be led from the place, pausing at the door to wave good-bye to his friends.

"Quite a spectacle," Summers grumbled under his breath when they reached the sidewalk outside. "I felt like an ass."

Jackie shrugged. "I wanted them to notice us. By the time we've hit a half dozen bars everyone in town will know you're my latest trick. That way no one will question seeing us together in the future."

The prospect of repeating their performances in half a dozen other places was not, to Summers, a very pleasant one. He steeled himself and followed Jackie down the street, hoping it would not take too long to solve the case.

They were approaching what seemed at first glance to be some sort of plaid mammoth. As they came closer, Summers concluded that it was a car of some odd sort, covered from the windshield forward with a huge blanket. "What is that?" he demanded when Jackie headed for the preposterous sight.

"It's my car," Jackie said. He whisked the blanket from the front of the vehicle and began to fold it neatly. The machine thus revealed was one that Summers was at a loss to identify. From the vertical grill, sided by huge, staring headlights, the hood swept rakishly back to a low-cut windshield of the fold-down type. Cycle-type fenders arched over the huge tires and swooped down to a running board, up again over the rear tires, and sharply down in the back. The tires, including the rear-mounted spare, were centered with strange, flat-spoke wheels. Huge and topless, the crimson convertible spoke of speed and power in a blatant fashion.

"That's not a car," Summers said aloud, "it's an animal."

"Bugatti," Jackie told him with a fond smile. "Type 55, 1932 vintage."

"What in God's name was the blanket for?" Summers asked, continuing to survey the vehicle. It was a man's car, the sort that made the blood run faster, that called up visions of giddy flappers and bootleg whiskey.

"It's a temperamental creature," Jackie explained, tucking the blanket inside the car. "I keep it in a heated garage. If the engine gets cold it won't go at all. Then you have to drain the oil and water, heat them to taste, and put them back. Here, you start it."

With mixed awe and anxiety Summers seated himself behind the steering wheel. “Does it have to be cranked?” he asked as Jackie produced that all-but-forgotten automotive tool.

"It doesn't have to be, but a real buff hand cranks it with the switch off, to ease the pistons. I'll say when."

Summers watched his companion with new respect. This was a side of Jackie he would never have suspected, one that seemed totally out of character. Maybe the guy wasn't all as bad as he put on.

At Jackie's okay he started it up, grinning as the powerful engine roared to life. This was the roar he had heard from inside the bar, and it was easy to see now how the others had known Jackie was arriving —there couldn't be two cars with that same deep-chested bellow.

"Want to drive it?” Jackie asked him.

"Think I can?” Summers answered with a shy grin.

"Nothing to it,” Jackie announced as he came around and seated himself on the passenger's side. “Let it warm up at one thousand rpms for a few minutes."

"Must be quite an engine,” Summers said as he gently revved up the power plant.

"It is, considering the age in which it was produced,” Jackie agreed. “2.3 liters, twin overhead camshaft, and eight cylinders—with a supercharger that blows ten pounds. It'll do one hundred twenty miles per hour—a hundred in third gear—and zero to sixty in nine seconds."

Summers did not want to admit that the terminology was a little complicated for him. But the figures were impressive and the car was certainly an exciting experience.

"Should he warm enough now.” Jackie decided. “Give it a try.” Summers started off cautiously. There was an embarrassing growl as he tried to shift the gears. “I should have warned you about that.” Jackie smiled. “The Bugatti folks didn't worry much about modernisms like synchronizers in their gearboxes. The point was to build the most powerful, beautiful brute possible. Their tradition was never concerned with creature comforts like ease of shifting. These transmissions are referred to as crashboxes and that's just about a perfect description."

Summers didn't quite get it. First there was the virtual reverence for the car, even to the bit about the heated garage. And now ... crashbox?

"You're being too gentle," Jackie yelled over the sound of the motor. "Slam it through."

Summers did as directed, with better results. He had wondered, hearing of the car's peculiarities, if it was worth the bother. He decided, as they charged forward, that it was. The front wheels pointed exactly where his hands on the wheel told them to. They fairly leaped around a corner, Summers feeling like a god.

"Exciting, isn't it?" Jackie called to him.

"Makes me feel like a kid again," Summers called back happily. "Where did you ever pick this up?"

"They're a hobby with me. This is my pet, though. There isn't anything on the road, except maybe some of the Alfa Romeos of the thirties, that is as much a joy to drive. As I said, though, it's temperamental. There aren't a half a dozen men in this country qualified to work on it."

"Don't tell me you're one of them?"

"Of course," Jackie assured him casually. "I trained with one of the original Bugatti engineers."

Summers grinned again and slammed the car into another corner. He still didn't like homosexuals, but he had to admit that Jackie was certainly different from what he had expected. At the moment he was having the time of his life.

Maybe, he thought, this assignment wasn't going to be such a bad one after all.

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Chapter 3

It was late by the time they left their last bar, having made their presence known in nearly a dozen different spots. Jackie was behind the wheel of the Bugatti—the “Bug,” as he called it—and driving, Summers observed, not at all like a homosexual.

"Guess you'd better drop me at my hotel,” Summers instructed him wearily. It had been a long night and a strange one. In a sense they had accomplished nothing so far as working on the case. Jackie, however, was well satisfied that they had successfully created a necessary front for their association.

"I had your things moved out of your hotel,” Jackie informed him offhandedly.

Summers sat upright. “You what?” he demanded loudly.

"You're staying at my place,” Jackie answered. “You're my new trick, remember?” He grinned as Summers started to protest. “Don't worry, there's a very comfortable bed in the den—and you can even lock the door if you're nervous."

Summers swallowed his words and finally managed to grin as well. “Thanks,” he said. “I thought maybe you were pulling a fast one."

"I haven't promised I wouldn't,” Jackie warned him, aiming the car into a driveway on their right. Summers had a glimpse of concrete and steel rushing toward them and braced himself for a violent collision. The wall, however, slid mysteriously out of their way and the car roared into a basement garage.

"Remote control,” Jackie explained, steering the car more slowly into a stall. They climbed out of the car and Jackie locked the door of the stall behind them. Summers saw, as they crossed the garage, that the walls were lined with similar stalls.

"What's in those?” he asked.

"More cars,” Jackie explained. “I told you, it's a hobby."

"You must be pretty wealthy.” Summers followed as Jackie opened a

door to an elevator.

"I am," Jackie said simply. He fitted a key into the elevator and they shot upward, stopping with a suddenness that took the breath away.

"I thought you lived in that other place."

"Behind the bar?" Jackie asked. "Oh, no, that's one of C.A.M.P.'s offices. I use it for business purposes only. This is home."

Home proved to be no less luxurious than the offices of C.A.M.P., although somewhat fussier in decor. The furnishings were French, although Summers could not identify the period. The walls were lined with paintings, some of which he recognized as famous masterpieces. He had no doubt that they were authentic.

There was a flurry of movement and a miniature white poodle bounded across the room toward them, pink bows flopping. Summers, always fond of pets, although the poodle was not one of his favorites, automatically stooped to greet the dog.

"Watch out," Jackie yelled. Summers pulled his hand back just in time to miss the two rows of razor-sharp teeth. In one quick movement Jackie had swept the dog into his arms.

"She's trained to kill," Jackie explained. "You came close to losing that hand."

Summers was shaken and amazed. "That little ball of fluff?"

"We like to look harmless," Jackie told him. "Come on, let her sniff you." He held the dog close to Summers, giving the animal ample time to sniff suspiciously. "It's all right, Sophie," he assured the dog repeatedly, "he's a friend."

Sophie seemed finally satisfied and was once more deposited on the floor. She approached Summers again, this time with her tail wagging. Summers remained hesitant.

"It's okay now," Jackie insisted. "Scratch her belly so she'll know you like her."

Summers reached down somewhat cautiously and gave the pink underside a quick scratch. The dog seemed to be perfectly harmless now, bouncing up to lick his nose ingratiatingly.

"How about a nightcap?" Jackie asked.

"Sounds great," Summers answered. As Jackie left the room he glanced about once more. One item caught his attention, a wood carving placed in the spot of honor atop a huge credenza. An enormous anatomy portion, it stood nearly two feet tall.

"Like it?" Jackie asked him, returning. He had exchanged his outfit for a lounging outfit of white silk that vaguely resembled pajamas.

"It's different," Summers replied caustically. "What are all those scratches?" Both sides of the carving were deeply cut up and down their length.

"Nothing you'd be interested in," Jackie assured him with one of those mysterious expressions Summers was beginning to recognize but not understand. "How about this drink?"

"Thanks," Summers said, taking the drink and dropping wearily into a chair. Jackie helped himself to the other, curling up across from Summers.

"This organization," Summers said, downing a mouthful of his drink, "what in the hell do those letters stand for, anyway?"

Jackie's eyes twinkled mischievously. "All the things I surround myself with. You really don't want to know."

"I'm curious," Summers insisted.

"Well, the C might stand for sucker," Jackie told him.

"But that doesn't start with..." Summers caught himself and blushed. He couldn't tell whether Jackie was serious or only teasing him. "Okay, forget it. But how the devil did you get involved with it?"

Jackie grew sober with another one of his mercurial changes of expression. "It's a long story. Quite a while back, when I was a kid—never mind how long ago—I had a crush on a guy. Oh, he didn't know I was around really, he was much older than I was. But I worshipped him. He had everything—looks, a good position, charm the works. Then something happened. He became irritable around other people and started drinking heavily. He was going downhill and no one knew why. It seems he was being blackmailed by someone he had picked up. Things went from bad to worse for him, and finally he killed himself."

"He could have gone to the police," Summers offered quietly.

Jackie gave him a long stare. "The guy blackmailing him was a policeman," he said calmly. "Anyway, this man came around one day and asked me about it. I thought at first he was with the police, but it turned out he was from C.A.M.P. They were a new group then, just getting started. Well, it sounded interesting to me. I had a fortune coming to me, and I figured I'd as soon use it doing something worthwhile for others like my idol, so here I am."

"Do you run the organization?"

Jackie laughed and shook his head. "Oh, I'm just a small cog in one of many wheels. There are branches concerned with politics and the law, working to improve the lot of the homosexual, others working in the arts, the medical fields, and psychiatry. I'm in the police branch. Our job is to protect homosexuals, anywhere in the world."

As Jackie talked, it seemed to Summers as though he were listening to a badly tuned radio. The sound level kept falling and then rising. His vision began to blur and he shook his head, suddenly realizing what was wrong. He looked up to see Jackie silent and watching him with a faint smile.

"The drink," Summers stammered, trying to stand. "There was something in it." He managed to get out of the chair before he passed out, falling unconscious across the floor.

The first thing Summers saw when he came to was Jackie, still smiling at him. There was a moment before Summers remembered what had happened. The anger came back into his eyes then, and he struggled to a sitting position, ignoring the painful throbbing in his head.

"You dirty son of a..." he swore, starting menacingly toward Jackie.

There was a warning growl from the floor and Summers looked down to see Sophie, the dog, with teeth bared. He paused, wondering whether he could get away with knocking Jackie's teeth loose before Sophie's teeth got to him.

"Now, now," Jackie clucked, reaching down to give the dog a soothing pat. "If you'll look closely you'll find that you're still wearing your pants, love, and there are no bloodstains on the sheets."

Summers surveyed the situation. He was still dressed, except that his sweater and his shoes had been removed. They were in the den, where

a pull-down bed had been made up for him. It was this on which he had been laying.

"Well, what was the big idea?" he demanded, only slightly pacified to see that he had not been molested.

"I had to operate," Jackie explained in his more businesslike voice. "I thought this would be the least painful way; besides, it saved you the opportunity of putting up an argument."

"Operate?" Summers looked himself over again. In his anger he had not noticed that his thumb of his right hand was sporting a loose bandage. Now that he became aware of it, it was also sore.

"You can take the bandage off now," Jackie informed him.

Summers did so, holding up his thumb. Aside from a few spots of blood and the soreness there was nothing to indicate what had been done.

"The thumbnail you're wearing belongs to C.A.M.P.," Jackie went on. "It was necessary to remove your own nail, always a bit painful, in order to put that one in. With the homing device that's imbedded in it, it will be easy to track you down anywhere within a fifty-mile radius. I wear one myself. All C.A.M.P. agents do." He held out his own right thumb for inspection

Summers sat back down, still angry but begrudgingly admitting to himself that it wasn't a bad idea, although he didn't approve of the underhanded manner in which it had been accomplished. "Just who keeps track of my travels?" he asked.

"High Camp, our headquarters, for one," Jackie told him. "I do, for another." He held up the thumb on his left hand. "In this one I wear a tiny receiver. The range is less, of course. I can only pick you up within ten miles. The closer you get, the more my thumb throbs."

Summers gave him a rueful grin. "I suppose I've made a few hearts throb in my time, but never a thumb."

Jackie seemed genuinely relieved that Summers was no longer so angry. "I'll let you get some sleep now," he declared, standing. 'It's almost morning and we're going to have another night on the town tomorrow." He paused at the door and winked. "If you get lonesome I'm just next door."

"I just hope you don't sleepwalk," Summers answered.

With the lingering effects of the drug he had been given and the late-night activities, Summers found that he had no difficulty falling soundly asleep. He awoke to find that it was already afternoon.

Jackie was already up when Summers came into the living room. He smiled up at Summers. "Good afternoon, sleepyhead. Still sore?"

"Just my thumb," Summers answered him. "But I still think that was a pretty dirty stunt to pull."

"Sorry," Jackie told him, and meant it. "Sometimes I have to use the most efficient approach. I couldn't afford to spend a couple of days arguing with you over the matter."

"Do me a favor," Summers suggested. "Next time just ask me about it. I'm not that hard to get along with."

"Will you promise to do everything I ask?" Jackie wanted to know, turning playful again.

Summers grinned and shook his head. "Not quite everything. But I'll try to cooperate."

"I'll remember that. There's coffee in the kitchen and some juice. We'll get a bite to eat when we go out later."

Summers found the coffee and poured himself a steaming cupful, bypassing the juice. He returned to find Jackie cleaning what might have been a toy gun.

"What's that?" he asked, looking over Jackie's shoulder. "A cigarette lighter?"

"Self-defense," Jackie answered, handing the gun up to him. "A derringer."

Summers examined the gun, turning it over in his hand. With its elaborately jeweled handle and gleaming short barrel, it still looked more like a toy or an ornament than a weapon.

"Looks harmless enough," he said.

"It's like me," Jackie countered. "Small, hut lethal."

Summers handed it back. "Well, all I can say is it's an interesting

piece."

"All of mine are," Jackie assured him with an exaggerated wink. Summers did not pursue that line of conversation.

"What's our schedule?" he asked instead. He was growing impatient to get down to real business. Thus far their work had been limited to mere preliminaries.

"Tonight we explore The Blue Cave," Jackie told him. "And don't wear any diamonds, please."

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Chapter 4

The Blue Cave was more of a nightclub than a bar and was by far the nicest of the gay spots Summers had been introduced to. There was a circular bar at one end of the building, lined now with homosexuals of every description, although with few exceptions they were a discreet and rather polished lot. A planter of artificial flowers separated this area from the larger dining and entertainment section where the tables and booths were filled with customers watching a show in progress.

"Strippers?" Summers asked, indicating the girls performing on the stage. "Sort of out of place here aren't they?"

"Not at all. They're drag queens, boys dressed up as girls."

"You could have fooled me," Summers declared, staring at the lovely creatures on the stage. "Hell, I might have made a pass at one of them later if you hadn't warned me."

"Don't let me stop you," Jackie told him, steering him toward the circular bar and two empty stools.

"I thought you always got greetings when you came into a bar," Summers commented as they seated themselves.

"I'm not that well known here," Jackie explained in a lowered voice. "And anyway, this isn't that sort of bar. It's very discreet here. They bounce anyone who gets too carried away."

As if to demonstrate his point, a customer across the way, obviously feeling his drinks, was becoming rather loud and conspicuous. While the other customers at the bar watched in silence, a hulking figure of a man appeared suddenly at his side.

"Who's that guy?" Summers asked in a whisper.

"It's not a guy," Jackie whispered back. "It's a girl, at least at the time of the birth certificate. That's Big Daddy, one of the roughest lesbians in town. She's the bouncer here."

"She looks rough, all right," Summers concluded. "I wouldn't want to

tangle with her myself."

At Big Daddy's “request,” the drunk homosexual stood up to leave, gathering his things together rather hurriedly. He downed the rest of his drink, popping an ice cube into his mouth, and scampered out of the place without glancing back.

"That's how they keep things quiet in here,” Jackie said. He waved for the bartender and ordered drinks. “Cigarette?” he asked, setting his elaborate case on the bar.

"No, thanks,” Summers answered, removing a battered pack from his pocket. He sat in silence, watching the patrons for anything out of the ordinary. Beside him Jackie seemed to be unusually nervous. He played with his cigarette case, picking it up, setting it back down again.

"See anything interesting?” Summers asked him finally.

"Not much,” Jackie answered, frowning. “There's Big Daddy, of course. Our files have very little on her. I suspect she has her fingers in quite a few pies, but she keeps them nice and quiet."

"What about the bartender?” Summers suggested. “He's glanced our way a couple of times."

"He could just be cruising you,” Jackie pointed out. “But you're right, he does seem a little on the apprehensive side. Maybe we should keep an eye on him."

The bartender in question, a thin, nervous sort with jet-black hair glued firmly down, was kept busy serving the bar by himself. That fact alone, Jackie thought as he watched the young man at work, was rather suspicious.

"Seems odd, don't you think,” he commented to Summers, “that they'd only have one man working the bar with all the business they get here?"

Summers agreed with him that it did seem odd. They ordered fresh drinks and continued to sit and observe the activity in the bar, although nothing particularly out of the way occurred.

"Getting close to closing time,” Summers pointed out finally, indicating his watch.

"You're right," Jackie agreed. "It's time we were getting on our way."

"What about the bartender?" Summers asked when they were outside in the parking lot. "It looked to me like he was relieved to see us go."

"I thought so too," Jackie said. He started up the Bugatti, sitting for a few minutes to allow the engine to warm up. "I believe we'll see what he does with his time after hours."

He drove from the parking lot, turning into an alley half a block away and flicked off the lights. From here the exit from the bar was visible.

They had to wait nearly an hour before he eased the big convertible out of the alley and began following. He was careful as they tagged along after the Chevrolet to keep plenty of distance between the two cars so that they would not be noticed.

The Chevrolet finally turned into an alley. Jackie cut off the engine of the Bugatti and eased it to a stop at the curb. "This might be just a maneuver to dodge us," he said, climbing out of the car. "But I don't think he knew we were back here."

They moved quickly and quietly down the alley. Summers patted the reassuring bulge of a holster beneath his jacket, his body tense and alert as they moved. Two agents, Upton had warned them, had already been killed investigating this case. He was not eager that they be the third and fourth.

Jackie nudged him and pointed to a small parking area off the alley. The Chevrolet was sitting there, empty.

Summers indicated the back entrance to the building bordering the parking lot. "Think that's where he went?"

"Let's find out," Jackie suggested, leading the way stealthily toward the door. The door was locked, as Jackie had expected. He removed a collection of keys from the pocket of his coat. "One of these is bound to open it," he whispered, beginning to fit the keys into the lock. The fourth one worked and the door swung silently open.

They were in a long hallway, dimly lighted. A few feet from them a narrow strip of light fell across their path, as though a door had been left open on a lighted room. Summers paused, peering closely at the source of the light. It was not coming from a door but from a pencil-thin fixture built vertically into the wall. He started toward it again, but Jackie caught his arm abruptly.

"Electronic eye," Summers said, belatedly grasping the fact. "You couldn't even throw a paper wad down the hail without setting it off. What do we do now?"

"Retreat," Jackie answered, leading him back out of the door. "We don't want to send them running until we know a little more."

They closed the door after themselves and headed for the Bugatti. In the car Jackie drove around the block, slowing down slightly in the middle of the block.

"That's the place," he said, nodding toward the darkened front of a bar. "The Puss and Boots."

"Looks quiet enough," Summers commented.

"So does a cobra," Jackie reminded him. He drove swiftly across town, heading not for his own apartment but for the C.A.M.P. offices behind The Round Up bar.

"Won't the bar be closed at this hour?" Summers asked as they clambered out of the car.

"We'll go in the back way," Jackie explained, leading the way around to the rear. Another of the keys from his ring opened the door into the back hallway. Summers followed him through the rest room, remembering with amusement their first meeting here.

Despite the lateness of the hour, Rich was there to greet them. Nor did the homosexual giant seem surprised to see them. No doubt, Summers concluded, he was accustomed to working strange hours.

Jackie tossed Rich the cigarette case he had been carrying. "Get these processed for us," he directed.

"Processed?" Summers was puzzled by the request. "You mean...?"

"It's a camera," Jackie explained. "It may not help much, but sometimes if you review an evening at leisure you spot things you missed the first time around."

Summers was again impressed with the efficiency of the slender blond. Homosexual or not, C.A.M.P. was plainly a sharp outfit.

Rich disappeared with the case and returned in a few minutes. "Have it for you tomorrow," he said, waiting inside the door for further

instructions.

"Fine," Jackie told him. "While we're here check Records Section for me. See what you can give me on The Blue Cave and a bartender named Ralph who works there. Also what do they have on another bar, The Puss and Boots, might be gay, but I don't recall the name; probably straight."

Summers smiled with appreciation as Rich again left the room. He had not even thought to listen for the bartender's name, yet obviously Jackie had overheard it at some point in the evening.

"May as well have a drink," Jackie told him. "It'll take a few minutes."

It seemed to Summers that the information requested would take more than a few minutes to produce, but he accepted the drink and seated himself. "Do you think we've found the place?" he asked.

Jackie frowned thoughtfully. "I doubt that they'd work out of a bar. To produce those diamonds they need quite a bit of equipment and plenty of chemicals. My guess is that the bars are contact points, maybe for passing the diamonds. They have to get them out of the country, remember, not an easy task with diamonds of that size and quality, even if they are counterfeit."

Rich reentered the room carrying several sheets of paper in his hand and a small cloth bag. He handed Jackie the bag first. To Summers's amazement, the bag contained another of the counterfeit diamonds Upton had shown them.

"Where did this turn up?" he asked eagerly.

"From High Camp," Rich explained, although he spoke to Jackie, ignoring Summers. "That's a duplicate of the ones being passed. This is the formula." He handed Jackie two of the papers.

"You mean they've analyzed the formula already?" Summers asked.

"Quite thoroughly," Jackie informed him, studying the formula. As a highly skilled chemist, the complicated formula was as clear as water to him. "It's ingenious, I'll say that much."

So, Summers thought, was C.A.M.P. In two days they had broken down a formula that Upton's men were still working on.

"This is the other information you wanted," Rich said, handing Jackie

the rest of the sheets. “Looks like you might be on to something."

Jackie read over the reports silently. Summers, waiting for some comment, was rapidly becoming immune to surprises. Jackie scowled. “Could be coincidence,” he said aloud, “but The Blue Cave and The Puss and Boots bars are both owned by the same man, a Walter Mansion. The files didn't have much on him except that he has quite a variety of businesses—several other bars, a couple of laundromats, even an icehouse. He's straight, by the way, and The Puss and Boots is a straight bar. Oh yes, Ralph Mansion, the bartender, is his brother."

"Sounds like a neat tie-in,” Summers said, impressed all over again by the thoroughness of the operation.

"I think,” Jackie mused, staring into the fireplace, “I'd like to know a little more about Mr. Mansion and his Puss and Boots.” He stood quickly, having reached a decision of some sort. He removed a key from his ring and tossed it to Summers. “Better get yourself a cab and go on back to the apartment,” he said briskly. “I'm going to do some checking around of my own."

Summers was disappointed to be left out of things and felt besides that this job was definitely a two-man effort. “I think you might need me along,” he argued. “These guys have been known to play rough. I don't like your taking them on alone."

"I cut my teeth on tougher men than these,” Jackie assured him. “And besides, you'd only be in the way for what I have in mind. Make yourself at home and relax until you hear from me."

The tone of voice left no room for further argument. Disappointed but resigned to Jackie's peculiar methods, Summers stood to go. “What about the dog?” he asked. “Won't she take my arm off?"

Jackie smiled and shook his head. “No, she's used to you by now. Anyway, she's harmless when I'm not there to protect."

It was not until Summers was in a cab and heading for Jackie's apartment that he realized Jackie had not indicated how long he would be working on his own. He had no idea how long he might be waiting on the bench.

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Chapter 5

Summers emerged from the bathroom, pausing at the door to study the redhead lying on the bed. Like him, she was stark naked and unashamedly so. She smiled invitingly at him, making no attempt to conceal her nudity.

"Sure you have to run, handsome?" she asked him coquettishly. "I was just getting warmed up."

Summers pulled his trousers up over his hips and tucked his shorts neatly inside before belting them. He added his jacket last and finally walked over to the bed, smiling down at the figure there. "Sorry," he said, and meant it. "Maybe we can get together some day real soon."

"I'd like that. You have my phone number."

He left her apartment with a contented smile on his face and flagged down a cab on the street outside, giving the driver the address of Jackie's apartment. It had been a pleasant evening all in all. Since he had met the redhead in a bar some four hours earlier they had devoted their time to his favorite pastime. He had needed it badly, not just for biological reasons either. After working with Jackie for a couple of nights he had begun to think the entire world was gay, maybe even himself. His faith had been well restored by the redhead.

He scowled as they neared Jackie's apartment. The opportunity to enjoy himself had been used to full advantage, but it was time now to start thinking of business again, or rather the lack of business. For two days now there had been no word from Jackie and he was beginning to worry. As an agent Jackie was undoubtedly efficient, but they were playing with big game now and he still had his reservations about Jackie's abilities to protect himself. He was homosexual after all.

He leaned forward impetuously. "Ever hear of a bar called The Puss and Boots?" he asked the driver.

"Sure," the driver told him with a knowing leer. "It's a pretty swinging joint. Guy like you could make out there without any trouble."

"Forget the other address," Summers instructed. "Take me to The Puss and Boots."

He leaned back in the seat as the driver turned the corner and started off in another direction. He was, he knew, violating Jackie's instructions. On the other hand, if Jackie were in hot water he might very much welcome a helping hand. At the least he could do some snooping around of his own. Hell, he reminded himself, he hadn't been assigned to this case just to wait on the sidelines.

The Puss and Boots proved to be every bit as wild as the cabdriver had indicated. Numerous couples were dancing the Frog on the tiny floor provided, to music blaring from overhead speakers. The bar was off by itself in one corner, well situated so that the drinkers could watch the dancers and vice versa, without getting in one another's way.

"Scotch and water," Summers told the petite little brunette behind the bar, admiring the energetic wriggle of her fanny as she walked away from him.

The bar was not terribly crowded. Summers glanced around, his eyes resting on a slinky blonde sitting two stools away from him. He thought of the redhead and wondered idly whether he would be up to another such session in the same evening. It would be worth a try, he decided. Of course, for the moment he had business to attend to, but maybe a little later...

"All by yourself?" he asked, giving the blonde the benefit of his sexiest smile.

She gave him a slightly surprised look, then lowered her eyelashes. "I was," she answered in an excitingly low voice, "but not of necessity."

It was sufficient encouragement. He moved over to the stool beside her. "Can I buy you a drink?" he offered.

"I have a feeling I'd better keep my wits about me," she told him with a smile. "A fast worker like you. I'll nurse this one for a while."

Her face was exceptionally pretty, reminiscent of someone he had seen before—probably, he told himself, some movie actress. She was pretty enough to be in pictures herself.

"Come here often?" he asked.

She shrugged. "From time to time. Why?"

"Just curious. Tell me, what sort of place is this?"

"It's a fun place, if that's what you mean," she told him. "And a good place to meet people."

"That's encouraging." He was beginning to wonder if he really wanted to bother with work for the evening. With an effort of will he decided he should.

"Excuse me for a minute, will you?" he said, standing. "I have to go powder my nose."

"Hurry back," she called softly after him.

He found the men's room with no trouble. Glancing around first to assure himself there was no one around, he bypassed that. Another door opened onto the hallway he and Jackie had entered the visit before, its electronic eye still glowing at the far end. There were several closed doors along its length.

He listened carefully for any sign of life. The only sounds he could hear were those from the bar behind him. He paused at the first door, leaning his ear against it. It sounded empty, but there was no way to tell.

Careful to make no noise, he clasped the knob and turned it gently. The door was locked. He could try forcing it, but there was no telling what sort of alarm that would set off.

He had just started for the next door when a sound behind him made him turn around. He froze as he saw himself being watched by a surly stranger, a big bruiser of a man who spelled h-o-o-d in very legible letters.

"Lookin' for something?" the newcomer asked him in a gruff voice.

"Just the men's room," Summers lied hopefully. "I seem to have gotten lost."

"You passed it already." He jerked his head back the other way. "You want I should show you?"

"No thanks," Summers assured him quickly, edging his way cautiously around the fellow. He breathed a sigh of relief when no move was made to block his escape. He did, however, make a stop at the rest room before returning to the bar.

"I thought you'd gone on home," the blonde told him as he seated

himself next to her again.

"You just can't hurry some things," he answered, sounding jollier than he felt. He had almost fumbled the ball; maybe, he thought, it would be smarter if he went ahead and picked up the blonde and beat it out of the place before he made anyone else suspicious.

His decision, however, was a little late. There was a light tap on his shoulder and he turned on his stool to find himself facing two men. One of them was the hood from the back hallway and the other was no less dangerous looking.

"Better come upstairs with us," the hood told him. "The boss wants to talk to you."

"Tell him I don't think he's my type," Summers answered, bluffing.

There was a short jab at his side and he looked down to see the outline of a gun in the one man's pocket, carefully aimed at his stomach.

"I see your point," he decided. With a shrug he stood up from his stool.

"Up that way." The hood nodded toward a flight of stairs at the rear. Summers led the way obediently, wishing he had had the sense to go back to the apartment for his gun before coming here. He was unarmed and outnumbered, not a very promising state of affairs.

"First door," his companion instructed him. Summers opened it and walked into a large, well-decorated office. A short, balding gentleman rose from behind the desk. "This the one?" he asked.

"Yeah, he was snooping around downstairs," the hood explained. Summers stood silent and motionless as the older man approached and reached inside his jacket, removing his wallet. "T-man," he hissed, staring with frightened eyes at the identification badge in the wallet. "A special agent."

"I don't suppose it would help to tell you that I'm off duty," Summers offered, stalling for time while he tried to think of some means of escaping with his skin intact.

"Very funny," the man snapped, flinging the wallet to the floor. He turned to the two hoods. "Good thing you caught him. I'd better call the boss and let this be known."

"What about him?" one of the two asked.

The man dismissed him with a nod of his head. "No one will hear a shot up here, over the noise of the records," he said matter-of-factly.

Summers's mind was racing. This man wasn't the top boss then, there was someone over him, but unless he could do something fast the information wasn't going to prove very helpful. He tensed himself to spring.

The opening of the door was like a shock wave. They all turned sharply in that direction, to see Summers's slinky blonde from the bar framed in the opening, a tray of drinks in her hand.

Her innocent eyes surveyed the room, apparently puzzled by their startled faces. "I was told to bring up a tray of drinks," she explained meekly.

"Someone made a mistake," the head man growled. "Get the hell out of here."

The blonde took a step backward as though to leave. The head man's eyes narrowed suddenly with suspicion. "Wait a minute," he snapped, "You're not one of our girls. Who the hell...?"

As he spoke he grabbed for a gun atop his desk. Summers's eyes flashed back to the blonde in time to see a familiar jeweled derringer that had been hidden by the tray. The tray itself went sailing through the air, crashing into the face of one of the hoods. There was a sharp crack from the derringer and the man at the desk grabbed his shoulder with a cry of pain and toppled forward over the desk.

Summers sprang for the other hood, catching him with the gun half out of his pocket. His fist crashed loudly into the man's jaw, snapping the head back and sending the man tumbling to the floor.

The one who had taken the tray in his face was charging for Jackie. Summers was faster, catching him in a flying tackle that sent them both into the wall. He rolled with the man in his arms, but the fight was brief. The end of Jackie's derringer thudded against the man's head and he fell limp in Summers's arms.

"Quite a right you've got there," Jackie told him, helping him to his feet.

"Thanks," Summers said, shaking his head. "But how in the hell did

you get here and what are you doing in that getup?"

"Trying to get myself picked up by a handsome agent," Jackie quipped. "Check the one at the desk."

Summers frowned in annoyance at the remark, remembering how much he had been looking forward to getting acquainted with what he thought was a woman, only to find out it was his missing partner. But he did as he was told, giving the man at the desk a quick once-over.

"He's all right," he announced. "You only clipped him. He must have fainted."

Jackie frowned thoughtfully. "Better leave them here and get ourselves out of here. There may be more of his playmates around any minute."

"We could take him with us," Summers suggested, indicating the prone figure at the desk.

"It wouldn't help much," Jackie told him. He lifted one foot up on the chair and raised the skirt of his dress, slipping the derringer back into the holster strapped to his thigh. Watching the move, Summers had to admit with some disappointment that the legs looked pretty good.

"He's Mansion," Jackie went on, smoothing the skirt. "But he's only a front man for someone else. If we hauled him in now we'd only cut him off from the top man. If we leave him here they may yet give their hand away.'

The phone on the desk rang. Summers gave Jackie a questioning glance. "It may be the boss," he said.

"Better answer it," Jackie agreed.

Summers picked up the receiver and barked a hello that he hoped sounded like Mansion's. Obviously it didn't. There was a silence at the other end of the line. Then a strange voice asked sharply, "Who is this?"

Jackie, leaning close to hear, shook his head violently. There was another silence and then a click as the line went dead.

"Let's make tracks," Jackie told him, heading for the door. Summers followed close behind. They started down the steps decorously, hoping to reach the street without incident. Their luck was running cold,

however. Jackie saw the pert little brunette bartender look up in surprise. One hand reached under the bar.

"Don't look now," Jackie told Summers, "but I think the alarm's just been given."

A small red light had begun to blink on and off over the front door of the bar, not noticed by the patrons because of the multicolored lights all around. Two men, however, separated themselves from the other customers and drifted quickly in that direction.

Jackie turned toward the rear. Another red light was winking there and a third man had taken up his position. The hand in the pocket indicated to Jackie that he probably carried a gun, ready to fire.

"We can't shoot it out without risking the lives of some innocent bystanders," Summers warned him in a whisper.

"You're right," Jackie muttered and added mysteriously, "I think I'm about to break a heel." He lurched suddenly as though the heel had broken on one of his shoes and grabbed Summers's arm as he half fell to the steps.

"Cover me," he hissed, bending down in a pretense of examining the shoe. With one quick snap of his wrist he broke the heel from the shoe. One of the hoods below was crossing the bar, approaching the stairs.

Jackie gave the cap of the heel a sharp twist and flung it violently downward. There was a sharp crack as it struck the floor, and a second later it exploded in billowing clouds of black smoke.

"Back up the stairs," Jackie said, kicking off the other shoe to run barefooted. They sprinted up the steps, Jackie holding the skirt of his dress high to allow him to run. "There must be a back stair," he said as they headed down the long hall. They reached the end without finding any means of escape. "We'll have to try the window," he yelled.

"It's barred," Summers cried, flinging the casement-type glass open.

Jackie ripped the showy brooch from the front of his dress. One highly polished nail yanked a stone from its setting. He wedged it between the metal frame of the bars and wooden frame of the window.

"Hit the deck," he called, flinging himself face down on the floor.

Summers fell with him, hitting the floor as the brooch exploded over them.

The explosion was small but enough to loosen the frame of the bars. Summers lunged against it and the metal unit fell to the ground below. There was a shout behind them as one of the hoods from downstairs appeared at the top of the stairs. In one quick movement Jackie was through the window. He hung suspended for a moment to break his momentum. Then, releasing his hold on the sill, he fell to the ground, rolling as he hit. Summers was right behind him, rolling and springing to his feet like a circus tumbler.

"The blue Ford," Jackie yelled, racing across the parking lot. They dove into the car as shots rang out behind them. Summers's door was not yet closed as Jackie slammed the car in gear and shot forward, careening wildly out of the lot. They shot out of the alley on two wheels and raced down the street.

"What happened to the Bugatti?" Summers asked finally, out of breath.

"No woman would drive a Bugatti," Jackie reminded him. "Besides, what kind of getaway do you think we could make in that thing? We'd have to sit back there and let the engine warm up."

Summers laughed and then grew sober again. "I guess I really screwed things up, didn't I?"

"Yes and no," Jackie told him, one eye glued to the rearview mirror to see if they were followed. "I had already found out there was someone else over Mansion, although I hadn't yet found out who."

"And now they know we're onto them."

"They knew that already when they killed off the other two agents."

Summers felt somewhat reassured, although he was all too aware that his impatience had nearly cost them both their lives.

Jackie drove to The Round Up, entering through the rear door. At the rest room Summers paused. "How are you going to go in there dressed like that?" he asked. "This is a men's room."

"Easy," Jackie assured him. As he opened the door he reached for the light switch and flicked it off, plunging the room into darkness. Someone inside squealed with alarm. Jackie caught Summers's hand

in his and led the way hurriedly to the hidden entrance to the C.A.M.P. office.

"Hi, Rich," Jackie greeted his fellow agent. "Are the pictures ready for us yet?"

"All set," Rich informed him. "Want to change first?"

"Good idea," Jackie decided. "All this foam rubber gets bothersome when you're really active."

"Drink?" Rich asked while Jackie left the room, peeling off his clothes as he went.

"Thanks, I could use one," Summers answered. He sipped the drink and waited for Jackie to come back. A few minutes later Jackie entered the room once more. He had exchanged his outfit for a pair of faded blue jeans and a sweatshirt and had discarded the wig. Without the wig and feminine attire, the makeup he still wore on his face looked bizarre.

"Only take a minute to remove this," Jackie assured him, seating himself and opening a makeup kit. As Summers watched fascinated, Jackie peeled off the plastic that had helped change his features and disguise his face.

"So that's why I didn't recognize you?" Summers said admiringly.

"Tell the truth," Jackie quipped, rubbing his face with a cleansing cream. "It wasn't my pretty face you loved, it was the inner me."

"I'm still sore about that come-on you gave me," Summers reminded him. "Hell, I was really looking forward to some fun."

"We can still have that," Jackie pointed out with a smile.

Summers was saved the necessity of a reply. "Ready for the film?" Rich asked, reentering the room.

"All set," Jackie announced, slamming the makeup case shut. He was his own self again. The change, Summers thought, was eerie, like having two people who were actually one.

The lights dimmed. One wall glowed brightly then dimmed as the film began to appear as though on a giant television screen. The film was almost a complete record of everything that had happened in the bar

while they had been there. It began with the noisy drunk. Like a silent ghost, Big Daddy reenacted her scene, asking the customer to leave. Other people came and went, the bartender was seen glancing in their direction several times and also hard at work mixing drinks for the numerous customers.

"How long does this run?" Summers asked finally.

"As long as we were there," Jackie informed him. "The camera's automatic. It holds twenty films, almost the size of microfilm, and changes from one to the next automatically."

Summers groaned and lit another cigarette. He was tired already, and if his calculations were correct they had another hour and a half of viewing. Wordlessly, Rich set a fresh drink in front of him. Summers nodded his thanks and returned his attention to the screen.

Slightly more than an hour and a half later the film ended. Summers breathed a sigh of relief and sat forward. "See anything of interest?" he asked.

Jackie scowled. "I'm not sure," he said. "Start it over, Rich."

Summers groaned aloud. "You mean we're going to go through the whole thing again?"

"Just the first," Jackie informed him sympathetically. He, too, was tired, but with him work came before such luxuries as rest.

The movie began again. Jackie watched in silence as Big Daddy, looking like a hulking brute of a man rather than a lesbian, once again ordered her customer out of the bar. "Hold it there," Jackie ordered. The film came to a stop, the images of the two frozen on the wall. "The one Big Daddy is bouncing," Jackie said to Rich. "Run his picture through the files and see what you can find on him, if anything."

The wall went dark again and the lights in the room came up. "Are we going to wait?" Summers asked.

"I'm anxious to come up with something," Jackie told him. "If you're tired there's a very comfortable bed in the next room. Why don't you grab forty winks?"

The suggestion was tempting, but Summers was not ready to admit that he could not keep up with his homosexual companion. "That's okay," he insisted. "I feel great, really."

Rich was back in a few minutes with a single sheet of paper, to which was clipped a print of the man from the bar. “Not much,” he said, handing the sheet to Jackie. “His name's Peterson. He's a hairdresser, lives in Hollywood, has been involved in one or two shady deals of a minor sort."

Jackie scanned the brief paragraph quickly. “I have a feeling that the scene between him and Big Daddy was a fake, a cover-up for making contact of some sort.

"I thought so myself,” Rich agreed. Summers said nothing. To him the scene had seemed quite legitimate.

Jackie handed the sheet back to Rich. “Break down that film, check every customer on it. See how many of them are in the files and what you can come up with."

He turned back to Summers. “That will take a little longer,” he said. “Come on, I'll let you take me home and tuck me in."

Summers drove the Ford across town to Jackie's apartment, surprised when Jackie dozed off in the seat beside him. Asleep, the small blond looked incredibly young and quite helpless. The latter impression, Summers knew by now, was false. Nonetheless, something about the young man did tend to arouse one s protective instincts. And, if only for that reason, Jackie had actually become more likable to him, at rare moments even attractive in a way he couldn't quite define to himself.

Fortunately, that was one route he didn't travel. He could not help but feel sorry for anyone foolish enough to become emotionally involved with Jackie Holmes. Without a doubt it would be a painful and a hopeless situation. All the same, he could not help remembering how attractive Jackie had been as a woman. Too bad, he thought sadly.

He glanced at the sleeping blond again, the slight body, the delicate bone structure. Jackie's chiseled mouth and cheekbones had helped to make him look perfect in drag. So perfect, Summers thought, that it was a shame the whole thing was a sham.

And yet, looking at Jackie, the attractive face and relaxed body, Summers found that his fascination had not waned by much and this new interest in Jackie even sans the feminine garb and mystique—left him a little uncomfortable.

And if any part of his feeling was protectiveness, he knew he was in

error. One thing was for certain, Jackie didn't need protecting.

His thoughts becoming more confused, Summers stepped on the gas and concentrated on his driving.

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Chapter 6

Summers was still soundly asleep when Jackie rapped loudly on his door the next morning. He opened his eyes at once, instinctively alert. “The door's unlocked,” he called out, sitting sleepily up in the bed.

The door opened and Jackie appeared, bearing a steaming cup of coffee. “You're getting brave,” he said, carrying the coffee to the stand beside the bed. “Leaving your door unlocked. Aren't you afraid I'll attack you in your sleep?"

"The way I was sleeping I wouldn't have noticed,” Summers assured him. “What time is it, anyway?"

"Eight o'clock,” Jackie said, starting out of the room. “Better get up and at it, we've got work to do."

Summers groaned as the door closed. It hadn't been too long ago that he had climbed into bed, but there was no point in arguing. He kicked aside the sheet that covered his body and stood, stretching his arms over his head. He slept in the raw, and his splendid body was naked now, every bit as beautiful as Jackie had imagined it to be. The broad chest tapered to a slender hut strong waist and lean, sinewy hips. From his navel a delicate line of jet-black hair traced an enticing path over the rocklike surface of his abdomen, bursting into the luxuriant growth that adorned his lower regions. He was, by any standards, well built, the sort of man that would set any girl's blood racing faster and quite a few boys'.

He dressed quickly, sipping his coffee in between articles of clothing. Finally, taking the cup with him, he left the room. Jackie was nowhere in sight and he walked toward Jackie's bedroom without thinking.

His fellow agent was in the process of dressing himself. As Summers stopped in the door Jackie stepped one foot into a pair of jockey shorts, his back turned toward the hall. Summers was afforded a view of white-pink gently rounded buttocks. The skin was sleek and satiny smooth, and where the hills curved inward there was a sheen of golden down that added to the luster.

"Nice,” he commented without thinking, grinning. It had never

occurred to him before that a male bottom could be pretty, but Jackie's certainly was.

Jackie straightened, pulling up the shorts, and looked over his shoulder. “Remember that,” he said simply.

Summers blushed and took another sip of his coffee. “I was only admiring it,” he explained, irritated, although he didn't know whether it was with Jackie or himself. “I can admire a Ford but that doesn't mean I'd want to trade my Cadillac for it."

Jackie pulled a T-shirt over his head. “What do you think about a really wild sporting model?” he asked as his head emerged through the opening.

Summers surrendered the field and went to pour himself some fresh coffee.

After a stop for breakfast they headed once again for the office behind The Round Up. Summers was beginning to wonder if Rich were a robot the man never seemed to sleep, eat, or attend to any sort of bodily functions. He was always there, always ready for any task Jackie handed him.

"How'd we do on the pictures?” Jackie asked first thing.

"I worked on them all night,” Rich said, although he looked as fresh and alert as ever. “But I don't know if there's much of any interest."

The reports produced a sizable stack of papers. With Summers reading over his shoulder, Jackie began to thumb through them, scanning each page carefully but rapidly.

"What exactly are we looking for?” Summers asked. It seemed to him like looking for a needle in a haystack.

"Just about anything of interest,” Jackie answered. “Specifically I'm looking for anything that these people might have in common, something that will help us pick out the ones we're interested in.” They read on, one or the other of them pausing from time to time to study some of the reports more thoroughly.

"Another hairdresser,” Summers commented, reading one of the papers.

Jackie glanced up at him and back to the report. “You're right,” he

said thoughtfully, “That's the fourth one we've run across already, including the one Big Daddy ordered out of the bar—Peterson."

"That may be something,” Rich said. “In checking through the film again, there were several other people to whom Big Daddy spoke. At least one of them it looked like she was ordering out of the bar, though I couldn't see what his offense had been."

Jackie handed Rich the entire stack of papers. “Pick out the ones she spoke to."

Rich disappeared from the room. He was back in a few minutes with a much smaller stack. “Five of them,” he said, handing them back to Jackie. “And I think you may be on the trail."

Jackie thumbed through them quickly and handed them to Summers for his perusal. “Five of them, including Peterson, and they're all hairdressers."

"Could be coincidence,” Summers pointed out, “but it sounds like a lead."

"Darling,” Jackie said, laying aside the reports, “how would you like to be beautified?"

"Me?” Summers asked.

"Three of them do hairstyling for men as well as women. And those wig burners always like to gossip while they roll the curls. Come on, we're going to have our hair done."

* * * *

"It's too plain,” Jackie explained to the effeminate young man standing beside him. “I just had it done and he left it looking like a rag mop. See if you can't do something with it, please."

In the first of the two shops he was visiting he had told the man it was “too fancy.” If they had to look into very many of these places, he thought, there was every likelihood he would be bald from all the washing, burning, and setting.

As the stylist started the water running Jackie took advantage of the opportunity to study him. It was the customer from The Blue Cave all right. Now that he was here, however, he was at something of a loss as to how to proceed. He could hardly start asking questions without

arousing suspicion.

"Just relax, now," the hairdresser told him, tipping the chair back. He massaged Jackie's scalp gently as he shampooed his hair.

"You're new in this location, aren't you?" Jackie asked. The shop was obviously only recently opened.

"Yes. I've been in the business for years, working for other people, but this is the first shop of my own."

Not bad, Jackie thought to himself. The shop was a nice one, in a good location. It had cost a pretty penny to open such a place. It was interesting to speculate as to how and where the new owner had gotten the money.

Although the stylist was more than willing to carry on a spirited conversation while he worked, Jackie's attempts to extract any useful information from him were futile. Of course, it was entirely possible he was barking up the wrong tree. It might have been nothing more than coincidence that the hairdressers had all been in The Blue Cave, and the man snipping his locks just now could have gotten his financing through nothing more mysterious than hard work and thrifty ways.

By the time he was finished he knew little more than when he had entered the shop. Discouraged, he headed back to The Round Up where he was to meet Summers. Summers was sitting at the bar having a beer. Jackie nearly laughed aloud at the outlandish pompadour his fellow agent was sporting.

"Hi, love," he greeted him for the benefit of the others in the bar. It was still necessary that those who saw them around town regard them as "lovers."

"Hi, doll," Summers responded, acting his part. "How'd it go?"

"Not very good," Jackie told him. "Come on, I'll tell you in the car."

They did not, of course, go to the car, but entered the C.A.M.P. office through the rest room. "Any luck?" he asked Summers when they were inside.

"Not a damned thing," Summers told him. "How about you?"

"Same here, although at least my stylist knew what he was doing."

"You mean the pompadour?" Summers asked. “It is a little too much, isn't it?"

"It's gay, I'll say that," Jackie commented. “In any event, we're back where we started."

Rich had entered the room soon after they did. “What next?" he asked.

"I don't know," Jackie admitted. “What about another bar? Mansion owns several, doesn't he? Are any of the others gay?"

"I'll check," Rich told him. He was back in a minute with the information. “Just one, a place called The Jolly Roger, out at the beach."

"Don't tell me," Summers sighed as Jackie turned toward him, “We're going to go barring again."

His guess was accurate. A short time later they were on their way toward the beach and The Jolly Roger. Although it was still early evening when they arrived the place was already crowded, males of all ages drinking, flirting with one another, and dancing the twist.

Jackie and Summers stood at the bar and watched the crowd for a while. Jackie's cigarette case was in evidence again, recording events as they took place. Jackie nudged Summers suddenly and nodded toward the door at the figure entering.

"Big Daddy," Summers said in a low voice. “Looks like we might be getting warm."

"Maybe," Jackie agreed, holding his case to get a picture of the brutish lesbian. Big Daddy approached the bar, pausing for a moment to speak to someone there.

"Hey, that guy," Summers whispered excitedly, “the one she's talking to. That's my beautician."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. After what he did to my hair I swore I'd never forget his face."

"Come on," Jackie said, tugging at his sleeve. “I think we've seen everything we need to see here."

"Now what?" Summers asked when they were in the Bugatti and racing down the beach highway toward the city.

"Tomorrow I get my hair done again," Jackie informed him.

"Why you?" Summers asked.

"You can't very well go back again. At least we know we're on the right track after all, and I'm determined to find out the connection between these hairdressers and the phony diamonds."

"I don't like your working on your own so much," Summers objected. "It could be dangerous."

"Why, Ted Summers, I think you're beginning to care a little for me," Jackie teased him.

"I just don't want to see you killed until we crack this case," Summers grumbled, looking the other way.

Jackie said nothing, but he smiled happily to himself as he drove the Bugatti toward his apartment.

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Chapter 7

The hairstylist's name was Lindy, and by the time he was nearly finished with Jackie's increasingly tender scalp Jackie knew little more than before. Lindy had been no more informative than the other hair-stylists had been.

He was growing increasingly anxious as Lindy finished with his hair. He could scarcely come back again before a few days had passed, and yet he was sure that Lindy was an important link to the counterfeit diamond operation.

The door jingled as another customer walked into the shop. Jackie glanced up at the attractive young redhead, taking a moment to admire the body that the tight-fitting slacks did little to conceal.

"Be with you in a minute, Mike," Lindy greeted the newcomer. "Take your time," Mike said. "I'm going to use your rest room. Jackie watched Mike walk toward the rest room. The body, he decided, looked as good going as it did coming.

"That's quite a number," he commented to Lindy with a grin.

Lindy nodded his head. "Mike's a doll. Besides that he's got real class. He travels abroad all the time."

"How interesting," Jackie said. The diamond ring would need to move their phony diamonds abroad, since that was where they were showing up. To date he hadn't investigated that angle of the operation, hut he was reminded that it was an important one.

Lindy was finished by the time Mike returned from the rest room. Jackie was pleased to see that Mike had noticed him. He flashed Mike his brightest smile. He had already made up his mind to get better acquainted with the attractive redhead. Mike, to his relief, smiled back.

Jackie left the shop and went into the drugstore next door, seating himself at the lunch counter and ordering a cup of coffee. It would probably take Lindy forty-five minutes to style Mike's hair. He had the feeling that it might be well worth his while to wait around.

Ten minutes before the time he estimated Mike would be finished, Jackie took up a post near the door of the drugstore where he pretended to be looking through the magazines while he watched the hairstyling shop.

Mike came out almost on the dot. Jackie put down the magazine he had been thumbing through and started out the door of the drugstore, walking fast. He kept his eyes downward, as though preoccupied, and ran right into the redhead's arms.

"Hello again," he greeted the embarrassed young man. "Weren't you just in Lindy's shop?"

Mike's annoyance was replaced by an interested smile. "Oh, yes, you're the blond. I was sort of hoping I'd run into you again, but not quite like this."

Jackie laughed and looked the husky young body up and down. "Well, I owe you an apology at the least. How about letting me buy you a drink or something?"

Mike stole a nervous glance back toward Lindy's shop. Noticing it, Jackie realized that if Mike were connected with the diamond operation, he probably had strict orders about socializing.

"Of course," Jackie said quickly, "you could be nice and invite me up to your place for some coffee."

That suggestion seemed to relieve the redhead. "Good idea," he agreed. "It's not too far from here."

"I've got my car in the parking lot across the street," Jackie informed him. "I'll give you a lift."

Mike showed the customary curiosity about the car as Jackie drove in the direction he indicated. The address proved to be a rather nice one. The apartment was by itself, over a garage that stood behind and some distance from the house to which it belonged.

"Nice place," Jackie said as they entered the apartment.

"It's nice and private," Mike agreed. "I like it that way."

He took Jackie's coat, hanging it neatly in the closet. "Want that coffee?" he asked, turning back to Jackie.

"I can think of better ways to spend the time," Jackie told him in a low voice.

Mike chuckled and came closer, taking Jackie into his arms. "You're pretty cute," he whispered. "Why haven't I met you before?"

"I've been looking for you, too," Jackie said just before their lips met. He fumbled with the zipper of Mike's trousers and reached inside.

"Hey, you are a hot one, aren't you?" Mike said with a laugh. "Come on, there's a bed in the next room."

"Sounds great." Jackie followed him into the bedroom and began undressing quickly. This was one of the nicer aspects of his job and one which he took great pleasure in fulfilling. He tossed his clothes haphazardly aside, eager to get to business.

The business was quite worth getting to, he decided as he watched Mike undressing. He smiled as Mike's boxer shorts fell about his ankles. He was a real redhead, no doubt about that. Of course, he had already been convinced of that fact without the ultimate proof—Mike's body was pale skinned and dappled with the freckles that were the trademark of the true redhead. His hair was somewhere between red and auburn, combed straight back in a style that was almost a bouffant.

"Back in a minute," Mike told him, disappearing into the bathroom.

Jackie started toward the bed, eagerly looking forward to examining the redhead's body more closely. He caught himself, however, and paused. Pleasurable though it might be, he was here on business and this might be the best chance he had to look around.

Mike had brought nothing with him from the hairstylist's except the clothes he was wearing. If he were carrying any of the phony diamonds they had to be in his clothes. That seemed a rather open way of carrying them, but there didn't seem to be any other likelihood.

He hurriedly went through the pockets of the shirt and trousers Mike had removed a minute before. There was nothing there of interest. He checked the shoes as well, examining them for any hidden compartments or anything of that sort, but still he found nothing. He went back to the slacks and began to examine them more closely, feeling the hems to see if there were anything hidden in them.

"Find anything?"

Jackie jumped and whirled about, to find himself staring down the barrel of a .45 automatic. He let the trousers fall from his hand to the floor. It was a pretty ticklish situation. Nonetheless, he could not help noticing all over again what a sexy little body Mike was showing. Too bad, he'd probably never get a chance now to swing on that.

"Who are you?" Mike demanded, brandishing the gun threateningly.

"Just a born busybody," Jackie told him with a grin.

"Don't play games with me, sweetheart," Mike warned him. "The last cop that fooled with me ended up in the morgue—after I had a piece of him."

Jackie sighed sadly. So that was where the agent Upton mentioned had picked up his disease. Too bad, Mike had looked like such a nice young thing. It was just as well, after all, that they hadn't gotten around to making the scene together. It was proof once again, you couldn't judge an elephant by his tusks.

"Come on, let's hear it," Mike insisted. "Who are you and who do you work for?"

"I'm just a traveling gypsy boy," Jackie sang off key, "and I sing and dance for a dime."

"Very funny. There are ways of making people like you talk. We'll see what kind of tune you sing then."

"You'd only be wasting your time," Jackie said. It was true. Agents for C.A.M.P. went through rigorous endurance tests as part of their training, tests that trained them to withstand any form of torture.

"We'll see. Turn around."

Jackie did as he was told. Mike came up behind him and jabbed the gun into his back.

"Put your hands behind you," he snapped. Jackie did, and his hands were quickly wrapped tightly together with nylon tape, impossible to break or wriggle out of. Another wide strip was slapped roughly over his mouth. He was shoved forward and fell across the bed, instinctively rolling over on his back to face his enemy.

Mike laid the gun aside and came toward him with the tape. He grabbed one slender ankle and jerked it to the side, taping it tightly to one post of the bed. The other leg was taped to the opposite post, Jackie's limbs stretched far apart.

Mike stopped before his dresser and rummaged through one of the drawers. He turned with a pair of wire cutters in his hand and came toward the bed with a vicious grin on his handsome face. “Ever thought about becoming a girl?” he asked.

Jackie shook his head, watching with wide eyes as Mike crouched before him. His valuables were grabbed in Mike's hand roughly and squeezed. Jackie closed his eyes as the cutting tool neared his flesh.

There was a sudden crash from the other room as the door to the outside was broken open.

"Jackie,” a welcome voice called. “Where the hell are you?"

Summers! Jackie had been so preoccupied with his redheaded companion he had been totally unaware of the throbbing in his thumb that should have told him Summers was near. He tried to call out, but the tape held his mouth tightly closed.

Mike jumped from the bed and dived for the gun he had put aside. He grabbed it up, just as Summers appeared in the doorway, and fired wildly. The bullet set loose a shower of plaster from the wall beside the door. Summers's aim was better. He fired as he dived for the floor. Mike reeled and fell backward over the bed, blood gushing from his mouth.

Summers came over to the bed, scowling down at Jackie for a second before he ripped the tape from Jackie's mouth and began cutting his ankles free. “Looks like you were having one hell of a party,” he said, indicating Mike's nude body. “Maybe I came at the wrong time."

"You sound jealous,” Jackie told him, rubbing his ankles to restore the circulation.

"I'm not,” Summers replied sharply. “Why the hell should I care what you do with your time?"

"I'm glad you did care,” Jackie told him sincerely. “By the way, what were you doing here anyway?"

"I had a hunch you were going to need some help, so I waited around

that overdone barbershop. I followed you and this character, although I wasn't sure whether this was business or just pleasure. But I lost you a couple of blocks back and I had to drive around until I spotted the Bugatti."

"How did you know I wasn't just having some fun?"

Summers pointed toward the window. “I climbed that tree there and watched your joint striptease. I was about to leave when he came back and pulled that gun on you. I'd have let him have it then but he moved out of range."

"How is he, by the way?” Jackie asked, glancing at what had once been a lovely young thing.

Summers stooped over him and felt for a pulse. “Dead,” he said shortly. “I'll have to give Upton a call, let him clear it with the police."

Jackie scowled and climbed off the bed, reaching for his clothes. “I still don't know how he ties in with the diamonds, although I know for sure he was involved. He killed one of Upton's men after molesting him sexually, the swine."

"You didn't find anything on him?"

"Not a thing."

Summers stared at the dead body while Jackie slipped back into his clothes. “I'll say one thing,” Summers commented dryly. “I'm glad that beautician didn't give me one of those bubble haircuts."

Jackie froze in the act of fastening his belt. “Mighty Minerva,” he said excitedly. “Of course, we've been overlooking the obvious. Those haircuts are common today."

"So what?” Summers asked.

"So, what better place to hide counterfeit diamonds,” Jackie said, stooping beside the redhead. He ran his fingers through the well-groomed hair. The hair was nearly a solid mass. “It's fake,” he said, yanking hard at it. The hair came away in his hand to reveal a head that was shaved to the skin.

He separated the strands of artificial hair. Just as he had guessed, the hair was sewn to tiny pouches, dyed the same color and all but invisible to the eye. The pouches, he discovered, contained the

counterfeit diamonds he had been looking for. All in all there were an even dozen of them sewn into the phony wig.

"Well, I'll be damned," Summers swore, staring in amazement. "Smuggling diamonds by hiding them in a faggot's hair. That's a new one on me."

"Me too," Jackie admitted. "Now we know how they were getting them out of the country and into Europe. All we have to do now is find out where they're coming from and how they're passing them to the hairdressers like Lindy."

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Chapter 8

"Maybe we should just haul in some of the hairdressers," Summers suggested as they drove. "Make them cough up the information about how they get the diamonds."

"Too risky," Jackie argued. "We lose contact with the gang and maybe find out nothing. No, I think we'll let things lie for tonight and then tackle The Blue Cave again."

They reached the street of Jackie's apartment building. "I'll leave the car out," Jackie suggested, parking at the curb. "We can run over later and see if Rich has come up with anything for us."

While Jackie busied himself putting his blanket over the hood of the Bugatti to protect it from the chill of approaching evening, Summers started across the street. He did not hear the sound of a nearby engine being started nor notice the black sedan that crept away from the curb a short distance away, gaining speed rapidly as it drew near.

Jackie, always alert for unusual sights or sounds, heard the speeding engine and glanced up in time to see the sedan bearing down on Summers.

"Summers," he shouted. "Hit the deck."

Summers only half glanced in the direction of the car, but it was enough. He jumped for the sidewalk, flinging himself to the ground on the opposite side of a sturdy palm tree that would protect him from a collision. As he fell he rolled, yanking his gun from his holster, and fired after the sedan that had narrowly missed him. The car shot around a corner, its tires squealing, and disappeared.

Jackie's instinctive reaction was to give pursuit, but he was more concerned about Summers for the moment. He ran across the street, scarcely breathing until he saw Summers start to get up.

"You're okay?" he asked, helping his companion to his feet.

"I skinned my knee taking that dive," Summers said. rubbing the knee in question. "But that's the worst of it.'

"Well, we know now they're on to us," Jackie said. staring into the distance in the direction which the sedan had taken.

"Now, just a minute. They are on to me," Summers said. "Think about it—you were right there, leaning over the fender of the car. Of the two of us you'd have been the easier target, yet it was me they tried to hit."

"You're right," Jackie agreed. "Someone from The Puss and Boots has identified you no doubt. That puts a different light on things."

"It just means that from here on in I'll have to be more careful," Summers said.

Jackie shook his head firmly. "It means that from here on in you're going to stay out of the picture. I don't want you getting shot up under my very nose. The next time they may use their guns instead of a car."

"Oh, no you don't," Summers argued just as firmly. "I'm in on this deal and you're not cutting me out. We'll finish this assignment together."

Jackie studied him for a minute. He recognized the determination in Summers's face. The man's mind was made up and there was assuredly little that could be done to change it. "All right," he yielded finally, "we'll compromise. For tonight at least you'll lay low, just in case they want to try again."

Summers scowled at the suggestion. "I don't know. That leaves you a sitting duck if they decide to come after you next. We may be mistaken about their only being after me."

"What better way to find out?" Jackie insisted. "They may overplay their hand. And remember, I'll be watching for them now."

"I still don't like it," Summers grumbled, holstering his gun. "But I'll go along with it. Just for tonight though."

"Agreed," Jackie said with relief. "Come on, let's uncover the car and get you to C.A.M.P."

"What about just getting myself a hotel room?" Summers suggested.

"Too risky. I want you some place where I know you'll be safe. They'd need more than a few guns to get to you at C.A.M.P."

"Say, by the way," Summers said when they were in the Bugatti again and racing across town toward The Round Up, "why this sudden

overwhelming concern for my neck?"

"It happens to be a very handsome neck," Jackie told him curtly. "Besides, I owe you one. If you hadn't arrived when you did back at that number's apartment I might be singing soprano."

As usual, Rich was on hand when they arrived and not at all surprised to see them. He listened to Jackie's brief account of the attempt on Summers's life calmly and silently.

"A good night's work," Jackie concluded. "You've got a house-guest for tonight."

"How do we know they didn't follow us here?" Summers asked.

Both Rich and Jackie smiled at the question. "No one approaches any of the entrances to this place without setting off several alarms," Jackie informed him. "Even entering that stall we came through starts the alarms in here and activates TV cameras all over the place. One switch seals all entrances and exits so tightly they would withstand an atom bomb blast."

"Sounds safe enough," Summers agreed, sharing their grins. "But I still don't like this, Jackie, leaving you alone. If I know you you'll go off on some chase of your own."

"I promise I'll be careful," Jackie said, patting Summers's cheek affectionately. "And I won't do anything without checking in here first."

Looking over Jackie's shoulder, Summers saw a fleeting change in the expression on Rich's face. He suddenly had an idea what it was he had seen when Rich looked at him: jealousy. But that's ridiculous, he told himself, glancing back at Jackie. Surely Rich knew he wasn't the sort to be playing around with Jackie that way.

No, of course not, he corrected himself. How could Rich know that? They were together all the time, he and Jackie, and even Summers had to realize that he and Jackie had become more friendly with each other. That was a common result of working closely on a case with another man: a sort of camaraderie developed, a closeness that was something more than mere friendship. But then, he reminded himself, Jackie wasn't just another man.... Rich might well have reason to worry.

* * * *

Jackie left Summers in Rich's keeping and started back for his apartment. Like Summers, he too had noticed Rich's passing moment of jealousy, although he had already been aware of that emotion's presence.

He sighed, promising himself he would make it up to Rich when the case was finished. It was something Rich could not be expected to understand, this feeling of affection and oneness that developed between two agents working together, although it had a great deal to do with the affection that Rich felt for him. Rich occasionally worked with other agents but it was always as the “inside man,” working out things from his office. And it was with Jackie that he most often worked.

At the apartment Sophie was jumping up and down excitedly. She raced back and forth playfully in the way of a welcome to the too-often-absent blond.

"I guess you're overdue for a stroll,” Jackie said. Actually, Sophie had her own special run at the rear of the apartment, complete with stairs and a lap pool for exercise and a special feeding system that saw she had food and water whenever Jackie was not at hand—even a self-cleaning toilet area.

For all of that though, Sophie enjoyed getting outside as much as any other dog. Jackie picked up her leash in the kitchen. Sophie did not, in fact, require a leash for walking, as she was trained to perfection, but the law did require it and Jackie always carried it along respectfully although he did not use it except in special circumstances. Like her owner, Sophie liked to be free to run.

They walked past the little park across the street from the apartment, Jackie lost in his own thoughts as Sophie raced in and out of the shrubbery, sometimes disappearing for long minutes at a time.

Absorbed as he was in thinking about the case, Jackie did not see the shadowy figures crouched in the darkness near the sidewalk. He passed the spot, ambling slowly.

There was a sudden quick movement behind him. He tensed, whirling about instinctively. The move saved his skull from being crushed by the piece of lead pipe that one of his attackers swung at him. The metal caught him on one side of his head instead. Stunned, Jackie staggered and fell to his knees on the sidewalk.

He had a glimpse of a vicious-looking knife, raised for throwing. There

was a sudden snarl from the shrubbery and a white streak flew through the air, catching the raised hand in a flesh-tearing grip. The attacker screamed in pain, stumbling backward.

That one, Jackie decided, was Sophie's. The man would not get away from the combat-trained dog. With a quick movement Jackie was on his feet, charging for the second man.

This man carried a knife as well. He raised it menacingly and stabbed at Jackie. Jackie dodged, catching the arm as it went past him. With one hand, in a lightning maneuver, he bent the man's wrist inward while with the other he bent the arm at the elbow. The momentum of the thrust carried the knife back into the would-be assailant's own shoulder.

He roared in pain and anger and fell away from Jackie. Ducking down, Jackie grabbed the man's legs at the knees, bending them with one hard yank. At the same time he butted his head violently into the man's stomach. His opponent bent double and fell, the breath knocked out of him.

Jackie turned back to the first man. This one had dropped to the ground and was trying desperately to fight Sophie away from his throat, which she was determined to rip open.

"Sophie, no!" Jackie yelled. He wanted these two alive.

Obediently Sophie released her hold and, suddenly docile and harmless looking, jumped aside to sit on the sidewalk nearby.

Jackie saw, too late, the object that the assailant had been struggling to free from his pocket. There was a puff as it struck the sidewalk just in front of Jackie and the tear gas enveloped him in a cloud.

Sophie yelped as the gas reached her eyes, too. Their attackers took advantage of the blinding gas to make their escape. Rubbing his eyes painfully, Jackie heard the sound of their car roaring to life and a second later they were gone, racing down the street.

Grabbing Sophie in his arms Jackie stumbled blindly back to the apartment. It took quite a while and towels dripping with cold water to restore his sight and relieve the painful burning. Sophie, too, had to be treated, her tail between her legs the whole time.

The question that had existed in Jackie's mind, however, was now answered. He knew now that it was not only Summers that the gang

was on to but both of them. And that meant they would have to work fast before the diamond gang had time to break up their operations or stage more successful attempts on his life and Summers's.

After seeing Sophie safely settled for the night, Jackie changed clothes and left the apartment again, heading back to The Round Up. Rich was at work when he got there, in the inner office. Summers, curled up before the fireplace with a book, was surprised to see him.

"What's up?" he asked, setting his book aside.

"My number, almost," Jackie answered. He explained about the attack.

"I had a hunch something like that would come up," Summers reminded him. "Now I'm going to have my way for a change. You're going to spend the night here, too."

Jackie shook his head. "There isn't time to waste. I want to return to The Blue Cave tonight. I promised I wouldn't do anything without letting you know, so consider yourself informed. I'm on my way back to that bar."

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Chapter 9

"Like hell you are," Summers snapped. "You're not going back to that place alone. If you insist on going right now I'll go too."

"One person can move a lot faster and quieter than two," Jackie pointed out stubbornly.

"And get killed a lot faster, too," Summers argued. "They'll have a harder time with two of us."

"They'll recognize you first thing."

"No faster than they'll recognize you."

Jackie sighed. He was wasting his time, he knew. Summers's mind was obviously made up. "All right," he relented. "We'll use a little makeup, make ourselves less recognizable."

"Now you're talking," Summers said with a satisfied grin.

Rich helped them with the disguises. Jackie decided on a reddish-brown wig. Plastic again changed his features, giving him a perky, upturned nose. With the addition of a few freckles he looked like a happy young Irishman.

The gray in Summers's hair was covered to give him the sleek black hair of a younger man. With new, bushy eyebrows and a large, bristling mustache he too looked like another person altogether.

"Tune in on our homing transmitters," Jackie instructed Rich before they left. "If we haven't checked back within the next two hours alert High Camp and also Lou Upton. Tell them where we went and why."

"You aren't taking any chances, are you?" Summers commented as they left and started out once again in the red convertible.

"We're getting too close to the end," Jackie answered him grimly. "Things may get rough from here in. If we get finished off that's one thing, but I'd hate for all of our work to be wasted."

That, Summers thought to himself, was a true business mind. The assignment came first.

The Blue Cave seemed little different from what it had been. Ralph had been replaced by another bartender who seemed no less unsavory. Jackie and Summers took places at one end of the bar to watch the activities. Jackie did not use the cigarette case camera this time. It might be too easily recognized nor did he feel the need for more photographs. The film had served its purposes, but it was up to them now to find the clue they were looking for, something that would tie the bar in with the operation. He was convinced that it was here that the diamonds were being passed to the hairdressers, who in turn planted them in the hair of the men who then delivered them abroad. But how the diamonds were being passed here in the bar he still did not know.

As they sat and watched, two of the hairdressers they had seen on their film appeared in the bar. Each time, Jackie nudged Summers. Still, the time passed slowly and without success. Although they watched the two hairdressers closely, there was nothing out of the ordinary that could be seen in their actions. Neither of them strayed from the bar nor engaged in any particularly long or colorful conversations with the other people about them.

Jackie and Summers grew even more alert as they recognized Big Daddy crossing the room. When Big Daddy stopped briefly beside the first of the hairdresser suspects Jackie was sure they were close to a big discovery.

Nothing was passed from one to the other, however, he was sure of it. The hairdresser kept his hands on the bar and Big Daddy's hands were thrust deeply into her pockets. To his disappointment, Big Daddy moved on after a minute or two. She stopped near the other hairdresser briefly as well, but again Jackie could detect no movement that would indicate the diamonds were being passed. Big Daddy circled about the bar for a short time and then left again.

"Maybe we scared her off," Summers suggested in a whisper.

"I don't think so," Jackie answered. "If we'd been recognized they'd have done something about us by now."

He glanced at his watch. It was almost time to check in with Rich. The first of the hairdressers was just finishing another drink. He sat for a minute after emptying the glass, rolling an ice cube around in his mouth, and then got up to leave.

Summers gave Jackie a questioning glance, asking silently if they

should follow the stylist. Jackie shook his head no. A vague idea was stirring within his mind, not really clear enough yet to be recognized.

"We'd better go," he said quietly. "Or Rich will be ringing the bells in a few minutes."

Disappointed and silent, they left the bar together. They were almost to the car when Jackie stopped suddenly in the middle of the sidewalk, snapping his fingers. "That's it," he said excitedly. "We've been looking right at the handover without realizing it."

Summers stared at him blankly. "I didn't notice anything," he said.

"Ice," Jackie told him. "Diamonds are called ice, and in this case that's exactly what they are. That wig burner was chewing on one of the ice cubes out of his drink when he left. And so was the first one, don't you remember, the one we had on the film."

Summers's face brightened. "You mean..."

"The diamonds are frozen in ice cubes and passed to the people Big Daddy points out to the bartender, and the man who owns this bar also owns an icehouse. It all ties together."

It was in much better spirits that Summers and Jackie returned to the C.A.M.P. offices this time. Even the usually expressionless Rich was excited about the discovery.

"Somehow," Jackie said, "we've got to get inside that icehouse. That may be the base of the entire operation."

"How about going looking for a job in the morning," Rich suggested. "That would at least get you inside."

"Not a bad idea," Jackie agreed.

"In that case," Summers said, "I think I had better be the job hunter."

"Why you?" Jackie asked. "It's not going to be any less dangerous."

"Because I look more like the type who would be hunting a job in an icehouse," Summers pointed out. "With this mustache and the other trimmings they'll never recognize me, and with any kind of luck I can manage to look the place over pretty thoroughly."

"I don't know." Jackie remained dubious. "It still sounds pretty risky."

"Look," Summers argued, "one of us has got to get inside that place, right? And of the two of us I'm the most likely candidate, agreed?"

"I guess you're right," Jackie admitted reluctantly. "But no heroics, okay? If they start getting suspicious you clear out of there fast."

"Suits me fine," Summers agreed happily. He was glad to have a chance at the action this time.

Having decided on their plan, they spent the night at the office. They were both awake bright and early in the morning, eager to be at work. With Jackie's help Summers again donned his disguise, exchanging his dressier clothes for a pair of coveralls and a work shirt that Rich supplied from the storeroom.

"Just so we understand things," Jackie said when Summers was ready to go, "I'll give you one hour, no longer. If you aren't back here by then I'm coming after you."

"My hero!" Summers exclaimed in a falsetto voice, assuming a Jeanette MacDonald pose. Growing sober again, he added, "Don't worry, I'll play it carefully. And I'll be back in an hour."

He left the office and caught a cab for the ride across town. A few blocks from the address of the icehouse he got out of the cab and began walking. There was no one in sight when he reached the place. Looking around as though he were just idly curious, he checked over the loading dock in front. The icehouse, according to Jackie's reports, was not a particularly profitable business, deriving its income primarily from supplying ice, block or cubes, to various bars around the city.

Still seeing no one, Summers strolled around to the back of the building. The small employee parking lot sported two Cadillacs and a Chevrolet. Not bad for an unprofitable business, he thought.

He knitted his eyebrows as his gaze fell on the Chevrolet. It was the same one he and Jackie had followed from The Blue Cave to The Puss and Boots bar. He was on the right track, all right. He walked back around to the front, looking up at the loading dock to see a surly stranger watching him.

"Looking for something?" the stranger asked.

"Yeh," Summers called back. "A job. What you got open here?"

The stranger shook his head. “Sorry, all filled up right now."

"Maybe I oughta leave an application,” Summers persisted. “In case somethin’ comes up.” He counted the steps to the dock, hoping to talk his way inside.

"Sorry, we won't have any openings for a long time,” the other man insisted. He stepped forward, blocking Summers's advance. “Try down the street at the paper-box factory."

Summers scowled. “I don't know how you can be certain someone won't up and quit on you. Won't take but a minute to fill out an application and leave it with you."

The thug advanced menacingly toward him. “Look, mister,” he said in a lowered voice, “I think you'd better beat it, okay?"

"Okay,” Summers agreed, backing away. It was a disappointment, but he had promised Jackie not to stir up any trouble if it could be avoided. They would have to find another way inside the icehouse.

"What's the trouble, Jake?"

Summers glanced in the direction of the new voice and barely suppressed an expression of surprise. Big Daddy had just come out onto the dock from the office of the building.

"No trouble,” Jake answered. “This guy was asking about a job. He's just leaving."

"Can't blame a fellow for looking for honest work,” Summers said with a careless shrug. He turned and started down the steps again.

"Hey, you,” Big Daddy called in her deep, mannish voice, “hold on just a minute."

Summers stopped where he was and looked back hopefully. “Think of a job for me?” he asked.

Big Daddy eyed him suspiciously. “Weren't you in The Blue Cave last night?” she asked.

Summers felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. He should have thought to switch disguises. He just hadn't expected to run into her here. “Never heard of the place,” he answered. His answer had not been quick enough, however. His alarm, although brief, had been

apparent.

"Maybe you'd better come in after all," Big Daddy said. She grabbed up a grappling hook from a nearby crate.

"Oh, that's okay," Summers insisted, backing down the steps slowly. "I can check down at that box factory Jake was telling me about. Maybe they'll have something for me."

Moving faster than would have seemed likely for his size and weight, Jake dropped to the ground from the dock, advancing toward Summers from the rear.

"Big Daddy says you're coming inside," he growled. An ugly switchblade appeared in his hand, its blade gleaming viciously.

"I guess you're right," Summers sighed, looking from one to the other. "Maybe I'd better come inside."

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Chapter 10

Jackie glanced at his watch anxiously and resumed his nervous pacing back and forth. Summers was five minutes overdue. He'd give the agent another five minutes to allow for transportation difficulties. If there wasn't any word by then he was heading for the icehouse.

"Any word?" Rich asked, appearing in the doorway.

"Not a peep," Jackie answered in a tense voice. "I don't like it at all, Rich. I knew I should never have let him go in there on his own."

"You're pretty fond of him, aren't you?"

Jackie gave him a surprised look. "Yes," he admitted, finally. "He's a pretty nice guy." He looked at his watch again. The five minutes were up. "I'm going after him," he announced. "You know where to look for us if I don't come back."

He drove as fast as the traffic would allow, anxiously aware that with each passing minute the danger for Summers was increasing. When he reached the street on which the icehouse was located he pulled the Bugatti to the curb, frowning down at his hand. The receiver in his thumbnail wasn't throbbing. He should be close enough by now to be picking up the signals. That meant that either the device wasn't functioning properly or Summers wasn't in the neighborhood. Of course, Summers might merely have been delayed somewhere and could be on his way to the C.A.M.P. office at this very minute.

Jackie tucked the jeweled derringer into his belt, pulling his bulky sweater down over it, and left the car, walking rapidly in the direction of the icehouse. There was no sign of life when he arrived. A large sign on the front door announced that the place was closed. Jackie took the steps to the dock two at a time and tried the door. It was locked. He pressed his nose against the dusty glass and looked inside, seeing no one.

Jumping down from the dock, he went around to the back. The parking lot was empty and the back door was locked as well. He glanced around to assure himself that there was no one close by, then, putting his shoulder against the rickety door, he shoved hard. The rotted wood creaked. He stepped back, bracing himself, and charged

the door. It gave, falling open.

The icehouse was small, with only the one office, a storeroom, and the ice room itself. All were empty, but he found something on the floor of the office the fake mustache that Summers had worn. He ran back to his parked car and drove recklessly back across town, careening into the parking lot behind The Round Up.

Rich looked up as Jackie burst into the room. “We've lost Summers,” Jackie said breathlessly. “Contact every C.A.M.P. operation within one hundred miles of here, tell them to be on the alert for the signal from his homing device. Then call Upton and tell him to stand by with lots of reinforcements. We may be needing them."

Rich hurried from the room to carry out the instructions. Jackie paced back and forth, slamming his fist into the palm of his other hand. If only he had followed Summers to the place, he could have kept track of him with the homing signal. By this time Summers could even be dead, and if he wasn't yet, he soon would be unless they could find him.

Rich came back into the room, carrying a large map of the city. “K office had picked up the signal,” he explained hurriedly. “They've pinpointed it to the spot marked with the red X. It's in Anaheim."

Jackie tucked the derringer back into his belt and went into the other room for a two-way radio. “I'll stay in touch. Don't send Upton's boys until you hear from me. If the gang panics they'll kill Summers for sure."

Within a few minutes he was on the freeway headed in the direction of Anaheim. Praying that he would not encounter any policemen, he gave the Bugatti open rein, weaving in and out of the midday traffic at breakneck speed. This was one of those occasions when he was grateful for the brute power of the car. The highway shot past beneath the massive wheels as Jackie crouched over the steering wheel tensely.

He reached Anaheim at last, abandoning the freeway for the streets of the town and driving more slowly. It was necessary to stop once or twice and check his map. Then, suddenly, he felt the welcome tingle on his hand. He was near now, and the receiver in his own thumb was picking up the signal from Summers.

He reached the spot marked on his map and screeched to a halt at the curb. It was an area filled with apartment houses, any one of which

might be the place he was looking for. Walking rapidly, Jackie started down the street. The signal grew stronger and then began to fade again. He retraced his steps, then crossed the street.

This was the building all right, now he had only to find the apartment. He started on the first of the three floors, pausing at each door then moving on. The signals grew stronger as he went on the second floor. Then suddenly they began to fade again. He stood in the hall, puzzling the phenomenon. Something might have happened to the device, but the signals were dwindling rapidly, fading away entirely.

The explanation came to him all at once. With a muttered oath he turned and ran back down the stairs. On the first floor he took a minute to run to the rear of the building.

Yes, there was a back stair and a door that led to the parking stall behind the building. That was the explanation for the lost signal—while he had been going up the front stairs to the second floor his quarry had been leaving by the back way. Right now they were on their way somewhere else in a car and obviously traveling fast.

He raced back to the car, breathlessly signaling for Rich on the two-way radio. Rich's voice came in faintly. “The address,” Rich told him. “I checked it out. That's Big Daddy's apartment."

"Was,” Jackie corrected him. “I just missed them. Can you give me a reading on that signal again?"

"I'll check K office,” Rich told him. There was a moment of silence before he spoke again. “They're still getting the signal, but it's rapidly pulling Out of range. They must be in a car."

"They are,” Jackie told him. “Where are they headed?"

"I'm getting a multiple reading,” Rich answered. “Give me a second. Yes, there it is. They're on the Riverside Freeway, headed east."

"Toward the desert,” Jackie said, more to himself than to Rich. “I'm going after them, Rich."

"You'll be out of range too,” Rich reminded him. “I won't be able to track you much farther."

"I'll have to take that chance,” Jackie told him. Without waiting for further comment he clicked off the radio and gunned the motor on the car, making a sharp turn to head back in the direction of the freeway.

Once on the freeway again Jackie drove the car flat out. With luck Big Daddy and her boys would consider themselves safe and would be driving considerably slower. There was still a chance he might catch up with them, at least get close enough to get a signal, hut it had to be soon. If the gang was headed for the desert it could mean almost anything. At the least they had a good chance to lose themselves in the stretches of open country between here and the resort towns.

Luck was with him. The freeway became an ordinary highway and he had just begun to despair of gaining enough ground when the signals began again, barely discernible. He leaned forward as though urging the car on. With each passing mile the signal was growing stronger, unmistakable now. They weren't more than ten or fifteen miles ahead of him, although in the open country now racing past the car the signals might carry farther than they would in the city.

Once again the signals began to fade. Jackie hit the brakes, the tires squealing as he came to a halt at the side of the road. He swerved around and started back the way he had come, watching the sides of the road carefully.

A half mile back he saw the dirt road leading off to the right. In a cloud of dust he swerved on to that road, little more than a track, and started off again, smiling jubilantly as the signals began to grow stronger again.

It was a good place for a hideaway, he thought. Already he was a mile or so from the highway and there was nothing around for miles. They could shoot each other or fire cannons without attracting attention. That made things rough for him. He could not count on help from C.A.M.P., not at this distance. He was strictly on his own, with no idea of how many people he would encounter or what lay ahead. Luckily he was not the sort to know fear.

In the distance he caught a glimpse of a building of some sort, rising from the sand and dust like a mirage. He slowed the car. Yes, the signals were getting stronger more rapidly now. His quarry had stopped traveling and the building ahead must be their destination. Cutting the ignition, he let the car glide to a stop. Leaving it there at the edge of the road, he started out for the building, running and keeping himself low to avoid being seen.

The building proved to be what was left of an old munitions factory, looking as though it had been closed up for years except for the three cars parked in front. A good spot, Jackie thought, from which to run

an illegal operation. If the cars had not been visible no one would have given the building a second glance even if they had happened to pass by it, which was unlikely in this location. The cars however, parked so brazenly in front, meant that the gang must feel they could afford to be reckless. If his guess was correct they were breaking up operations.

The entire building, a rambling, two-storied affair, was surrounded by a high wire fence. There were only two choices, Jackie decided unhappily walk through the gate, which was hardly a safe approach, or climb the fence, which would make him a sitting duck for any guards.

He picked what seemed the safest spot, protected from the front by the building itself and facing a section of the building that was nearly windowless. He crouched, drawing upon the muscles of his legs like winding a steel spring, and jumped.

The wire cut his hands as he grabbed hold, but he held, bracing his feet against the fence for support. His muscles bulging rocklike, he pulled himself slowly upward to the top. With a gasp of relief he was over and falling to the other side without incident.

He was inside the fence, and from here in, things were really touch and go. If he were spotted he wouldn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of getting back over the fence without taking a bullet in the back, not that he had any intention of running away. Summers was inside, and he had every intention of getting them both out of this place.

Crawling on his stomach commando-style, he inched his way toward the building, his eyes darting back and forth for any sign of life. There was nothing stirring. Things were so quiet he could almost imagine that he had been mistaken about the cars. He reached the edge of the building without incident. He rose to his knees, his ears against the wall. Still nothing.

Gun in hand, he stood and edged his way along toward a nearby door. Holding his breath he reached for the knob and turned it slowly. It was unlocked. He could be walking into a hive of bees. It was a good time, he decided, to use the “stopper."

Alert for any warning sound or movement, he undid the buckle of his belt. Moving quickly, he slid the jeans down, kicking his feet out of them. The shorts went too, leaving him stark naked from the bottom of his sweater to the top of his white stockings.

The stopper was an old weapon he had used in more than one tight situation. The shock of seeing a half-naked figure walking suddenly into a room was one that never failed to give him several vital seconds in which to act before his adversaries recovered from their astonishment. Not knowing how many people he would find inside, he might need every second of surprise that he could manage.

He took off one shoe, twisting the sole neatly aside to reveal a flat compartment. He removed a small but deadly throwing knife from the compartment, closed the sole again, and replaced the shoe. Gun in one hand, knife in the other, he pushed the door gently open and stepped inside. He was in a short hall leading to an office a few feet ahead. With the door open he could hear the muted sound of voices from the office.

They were here all right. He advanced slowly, walking close to the wall where the old floorboards would be less likely to creak. He paused at the door for a minute, listening to the voices in order to place each of the speakers within the room. Then he lifted one foot and kicked the door suddenly open.

The stopper, as always, was effective. Big Daddy and three men turned from Summers, tied helplessly to a chair, and stared in shock at the seminude figure in the doorway.

With rapid calculations Jackie sized up his opponents. Two of them were holding guns and they were the first problem. He fired seconds before the others had recovered from their surprise. One of the brutish hoods toppled over, falling to the floor. In the same instant that he fired, Jackie raised the knife, holding the blade between his fingertips, and sent it straight for the other gunman. He had taken top honors in any number of knife-throwing competitions and as usual his aim was perfect. The knife buried itself to the hilt in the man's chest. With a gurgling sound he too fell to the floor.

The third man dived for him, but Jackie was faster. He grabbed the wooden chair standing next to the door, hurling it at his attacker. The wood splintered across the man's head and he slumped unconscious at Jackie's feet.

"You," Big Daddy hissed savagely, giving him a look of pure hatred. "Damned faggot, always butting into someone else's business."

"The game's over, Big Daddy," Jackie told her, advancing toward her. Dressed as she was in male slacks and heavy boots with a battered

leather jacket, anyone else might have taken her for another of the hoods and easily the most dangerous looking of the group. Jackie, however, was unafraid as he came toward her.

"That's what you think," Big Daddy snapped, her apelike face breaking into a sudden grin.

Jackie saw Summers's eyes, over that bandage that sealed his lips, grow wide with alarm. A board creaked behind him. Jackie ducked and whirled, but he was too late. Something hard and heavy crashed against his head and the room exploded in a Fourth of July brilliance.

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Chapter 11

The room stopped spinning finally and the blackness began to fade as Jackie felt consciousness returning. He strained his hands and realized that they were bound tightly behind him. He shook his head to clear away some of the cobwebs and opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was Big Daddy, grinning triumphantly. “Surprised to discover you're alive, Tinker Bell?” she greeted him.

"A little,” Jackie admitted grimly. He glanced around, relieved to see that Summers, too, was still alive. The two of them were seated side by side on a mildewed old sofa.

"I figured you had worked so hard to find out about our little operation, I owed it to you to let you take a look,” Big Daddy explained. “Come on, on your feet."

"Sorry I got you into this,” Summers apologized, standing with Jackie. The tape had been removed from his mouth and, like Jackie, his feet were untied. He was also, Jackie was surprised to see, stripped stark naked. Jackie looked down to discover that the rest of his clothes had been removed also.

"You fiend,” Jackie snarled.

Big Daddy shrugged. “You didn't seem to be modest,” she said, “so I figured you wouldn't mind if we took the rest of them off. Besides, I wanted to be sure you weren't carrying any more little toys."

"What about him?” Jackie snapped angrily. “You must have searched him before you got here. Why didn't you leave him his clothes, at least?"

"Thought you might enjoy company. Besides, a good-looking hunk of man like that oughta be proud of what he's got. He your trick?"

"Go to hell,” Jackie told her.

"It's okay,” Summers told him. “It's kind of warm around here anyway."

Jackie gave him a rueful grin. About one thing at least, Big Daddy had

been correct. Seen in the raw like this, Summers was certainly a gorgeous hunk of man. Too gorgeous, Jackie thought, to be done in by this pack. Now all he had to do was get them out of here somehow.

"Come on," Big Daddy said, leading the way from the room. "I'll show you to your chambers, dearies."

The two men following them had their guns out and ready, aimed at the naked backs of the helpless agents. Jackie and Summers followed Big Daddy out the opposite side of the office, into a laboratory so modern and efficient looking that it was like stepping into another world.

"This is it," Big Daddy announced with a flourish. "Our own private little diamond mine."

Several other men were busily engaged in packing equipment into boxes and cases. "Looks like the vein ran out," Jackie commented.

"Thanks to you. But we'll just set up business somewhere else after things have cooled down a bit."

"You'll just be tracked down again," Summers told her.

"Not with your help, sweets. When we finish here this place is going to be blown sky high—and you two along with it. It'll be the wildest blow job you two ever got."

She laughed and led the way out of the lab and into another hall. She unlocked a door and took them down a steep narrow flight of stairs into a dusty basement. They went through one room and into another long corridor, at the end of which she unlocked still another door.

"You'll be nice and cozy here until the bomb goes off," Big Daddy told them. Their guards shoved them roughly inside. "Did you search them well?" Big Daddy demanded.

"No place left to hide anything," one of the guards, a swarthy Spanish type, said with a grin.

"What about their backsides? Some of these guys hide things there."

"I'll check," the Spaniard said with obvious pleasure. 'Bend over," he ordered Jackie.

Jackie did as ordered, grimacing as the dirty fingers examined him.

“That's valuable stuff you're playing around with,” he snapped.

"Won't be so valuable when we finish with you,” the man said. He gave the naked rump a smart slap.

"Kind of pretty,” the other guard agreed. “Can't do any harm if Juan and I have ourselves a little fun can it, Big Daddy?"

Big Daddy returned his grin. “Might do ‘em both good. But see that you're damned careful. One of you take his turn and the other one wait outside with his gun ready, just in case."

"Me first,” Juan decided gleefully.

"Okay, but make it quick,” the other agreed. “We don't want to be down here when that bomb goes off."

"I'll be upstairs,” Big Daddy told them. “Give me a hand up there when you've finished."

She left, the other guard following her out. The door closed behind them. “Yell when you're finished,” the guard called to Juan, locking the door.

"You filthy pig,” Summers snarled. “Let him alone. If you want to maul someone over start with me."

"Shut up,” Jackie ordered. “I've been hoping all along for a quickie with handsome here."

"Very romantic,” Juan said with a mock expression of romance. “But you'll both have your turn. Juan is a very hot-blooded type, you see.” He kicked out with his foot, catching Jackie's ankles. Jackie crashed to the floor. “I think I'll start with the little blond one,” Juan announced, undoing his pants.

Jackie pretended to be aroused as he watched the horrible creature undress. At the same time his hands, beneath him on the floor, were fast at work. His thumbnails were not the only artificial nails he wore, nor his only weapons. He caught the nail of his little finger in one of the cracks between the floorboard and broke off the edge of it.

"On your stomach,” Juan ordered, crouching over him. He rolled Jackie's body over violently. As he turned Jackie was able to scratch the man's skin with his broken nail. He smiled as he was pinned down against the rough surface of the floor.

"Oh, very pretty," Juan crooned, rubbing the velvety skin hungrily. "This will be very nice fun."

Jackie wriggled his body, attempting to stall. It would take only another minute if he could delay Juan just that long.

"Hold still," Juan warned him, poking him angrily. "You're only wasting your time trying to keep it away from me." Already his voice was beginning to slur.

"Hey," he said suddenly, shaking his head, "something is happening to me. I feel dizzy."

"It's the heat in here," Jackie told him in a concerned voice. "Better sit still for just a minute or two till your heart slows down."

"You think so?" Juan asked. His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "No, it's a trick," he muttered. He struggled to his feet. "You did something to me." He started toward the door but never made it. His legs crumpled beneath him and he sank to the floor.

"What the hell?" Summers asked.

"A drug," Jackie explained in a whisper. "I carry it in one of my fingernails. One scratch is enough to knock out an elephant for hours."

"Great," Summers said in amazement. "But he gave his gun to the other guard. How do we get out of here?"

"The first thing we have to do is get our hands untied," Jackie reminded him. "Help me find something to cut these ropes."

"Maybe he's got something on him," Summers suggested.

They examined Juan's body and his clothes. "Matches," Jackie said, fishing them out of a pocket. "You'll have to burn the ropes off my hands."

"I'll burn you too," Summers argued.

"Better that than being blown to pieces," Jackie insisted. "Come on, start striking."

The rope burned easily, although the task was a clumsy one. With their hands behind their backs neither of them could see what they were doing. "It's giving," Jackie hissed finally. The rope, smoldering hotly now, was burning at his wrists. "Another one ought to do it."

The rope gave at last. With a breath of relief Jackie broke the remaining strands. He held his wrists to his mouth for a second, licking the burned areas.

"I'll make it easy for you," Jackie told him. As Summers watched amazed, Jackie scratched deeply at the flesh of his buttocks. The skin began to peel until there was a peculiar edge hanging loose. With a yank Jackie tore the counterfeit skin away in two sections.

"Well, I'll be damned," Summers whispered in awe. "I thought you were just putting on a little weight. They were just beginning to look appetizing."

"Sorry," Jackie told him, "I'm built for swinging, not for bouncing."

Beneath the fake skin the artificial buttocks were made of tightly compressed foam rubber. With his fingers Jackie tore the material apart, removing two separate pieces of metal. Joined together they produced a thin dagger.

"You are a one-man army," Summers said as Jackie cut his hands loose.

"Oh, I'm not done yet," Jackie said. From the rest of the foam he removed a coil of thin, strong wire. "Fine for choking someone in a hurry," he explained.

"Now what?" Summers asked as Jackie opened his mouth wide and stuffed his hand inside. For an answer Jackie yanked loose the end tooth on either side of his lower jaw. As Summers watched he unscrewed the tiny caps on each of them.

"Explosives," Jackie explained, holding them carefully. "Small but deadly. Come on, we've got to move if we're going to get out of this place." He gave Summers the knife. One of the "teeth" he jammed into the lock of the door. "Give me Juan's boot," he ordered. Summers brought the boot to him quickly.

"On the floor," Jackie ordered, "and cover your head just in case." Jackie grabbed the unconscious Juan in his arms, holding Juan before him as a shield. Then with his free arm he threw the boot. It struck the tooth planted in the lock. Almost noiselessly the explosive went off in a puff of smoke.

"That's got it," Summers said jubilantly. "The door's open."

"Great," Jackie said, joining him. "Now all we have to do is get past the rest of them."

The first guard was waiting in the small room at the bottom of the stairs, his back toward Jackie and Summers as they stole along the corridor. "I'll take care of this one," Jackie whispered. "And do it quietly."

He wrapped the length of wire around either hand, holding a short length of it suspended between his two hands. Light-footed as a jungle cat he crept closer until, with one swift and sudden movement, he dropped the wire around the man's neck, crossing his hands over and yanking. The man struggled silently to free himself from the death grip of the wire about his throat, to no avail. He slumped finally against Jackie's body. Jackie lowered him gently to the floor.

The door opened from the stairs to reveal another guard. He and Jackie stared at each other for a fraction of a second, both surprised and off balance. The man raised his gun to fire. From across the room, Summers threw the needlelike knife. It hit dead center and the guard went down without firing a shot.

"Nice throw," Jackie told him. "Get yourself a gun." He removed a gun for himself from the hand of the guard he had garroted. "We'll need them I suspect."

Summers got the other gun for himself and retrieved the knife as well, holding one in either hand. "You know," he said, glancing down at the unconscious figures on the floor, "We could use their trousers. I don't feel too comfortable running around with my business flopping in the breeze."

"It looks lovely," Jackie told him with a wink. "Besides, there isn't time. As it is we'll be doing well to get out of here with our businesses intact."

The appearance of the last guard had been a stroke of luck for them. He had left the door at the top of the stairs unlocked. They crouched at the door and peered through into the laboratory where the business of packing and crating the equipment was still going on but with an air of urgency that clearly said time was running out. Several men moved about in the room all of them, Jackie noticed, armed. It was a good twenty-five feet across the laboratory, a long distance to travel with bullets whizzing past your head.

"Like it or not, we're going to have to go right through the office as

well," he whispered to Summers. "We may walk right into a hornet's nest there. Whoever is there is sure to hear us coming."

"There's a window here," Summers pointed out, nodding his head toward one wall. There were, in fact, not one but two windows, a large double affair that looked out upon the desert.

"It's worth a try," Jackie agreed. "I can take that stool to the windows. You'll have to cover me with the gun. Unless..." He glanced down at the one remaining explosive tooth.

"Hang on to your hat," he whispered, "and be ready to head for those windows."

All but two of the men were standing fairly close together in one area of the room. Jackie threw the door wide open and hurled the tooth into their midst. It exploded with a puff of smoke.

"Now," Jackie yelled, dashing into the room. Summers followed him, firing at the others as he went. With scarcely a pause, Jackie grabbed the stool from the floor and hurled it through the glass. He dived through the window, disregarding the jagged edges that tore his legs. A few cuts were of no great consequence under the circumstances. He hit the dust, rolling and scrambling to his feet with the agility of the acrobat he had trained to be. Summers was right behind him. He paused to fire at a face that appeared in the window and then they were off, running at a crouch.

Bedlam broke loose behind them. Another window crashed open and a volley of shots rang out behind them. The two naked men dived for the protection of a mound of earth, flinging themselves to the ground behind it.

Jackie glanced anxiously around, taking stock of the situation. They were on the correct side of the house, and not too far in the distance was the safety of the Bugatti, waiting to carry them away from the place. But they were not at the Bugatti yet, and the distance that separated them from the car might as well have been miles. There was nearly a hundred yards of open space between them and the fence which would have to be climbed, and after that another stretch of unprotected desert.

To the front of the building was the gate, but that had been closed when he had seen it before and possibly even locked; nor was it likely that they could reach the gate without providing easy targets for the bullets flying about them.

"We'll have to break for the fence," he said aloud, indicating the wall of wire in the distance.

Summers looked dubious. "We'll be sitting ducks," he stated. "But I guess we don't have too much choice, do we?"

"We may not have any choice," Jackie said curtly, pointing off to the side. Summers looked, in time to see three running figures dash from the building, circling swiftly around them.

He swore and aimed the gun. One of the trio pitched forward. Summers fired again and missed this time. His heart raced as he realized that this was one of the few times in his life he had ever been truly frightened, perhaps the only time that he had felt hope was useless. He had been in previous tight spots, of course, many of them. But there was something so radically different about these crazy people and their crazy perversions. Only Jackie didn't seem crazy to him, yet he had to admit he had never seen such wild weaponry as the C.A.M.P. agent was able to come up with. And of course, there was the fact that he was not only in a helpless situation one from which he really could see no way out—but he was...

Nude. Naked as the day he was born. And he had to fight for his life in this condition? Bare-butt in the scorching desert? He had to admit to himself that he was scared green. This was the most preposterous thing that had ever happened to him. His normal activities had always been dangerous enough, but he was used to dealing with civilized spies and criminals ... and at least he had always been armed or clothed and with a halfway decent chance of rescue when he'd been captured.

If there were only a car on this side of the building, he thought. We'd have something for at least partial shelter, and maybe Jackie could cross the wires or some damn thing and we could take our chances trying to ram the fence—or something, but the gang's cars were all on the opposite side, too far away to do them any good.

He looked around in desperation but saw, as Jackie had seen, only the barren, rocky ground. "They're surrounding us!" he exclaimed angrily.

"Come on," Jackie told him, scrambling to a kneeling position. "It's now or never."

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Chapter 12

Rich was worried. Up until now he had had pretty much unshakable faith in the operation, but he knew Jackie was up against a tough hunch. Most of Rich's personal energies had been burned up in sublimating the jealousy that Jackie's behavior was constantly building in him.

He had nothing against Ted Summers really, thinking of it more objectively. Rich actually almost liked him. He just did not particularly go for having Jackie paired off with such a good-looking specimen. But now he felt real fear for Jackie's safety. By this time both of his chicks were out of radio range and he'd better do something about it.

Rich had a good, working knowledge of the desert area to the east, and he knew he would be needed out there, somewhere soon. He had been fairly certain the mission would have been a success had the wrap-up been possible in Los Angeles, possibly with their communication intact at all times or at least up to the last moment, with only the usual, attendant dangers. But something gnawed at him....

Though his was a sensitive nature, Rich was strong physically and not given to too much introspection. Yet his feeling for Jackie was genuine, and whatever daydreaming he did do, whatever insights and musings did drift across his mind, concerned C.A.M.P.'s top agent. A twinge of something like intuition told him he would be needed ... and soon.

Going on this and little else, Rich plowed through heavy traffic that finally gave way to open roadway east on the Riverside Freeway, where he had last had contact with Jackie. Once inside the Riverside County line he kept his eyes open for a little-used exit ramp. When he found it he left the main road and headed north through desolate territory. The receiver he had brought with him still failed to pick up any signals at all.

He traveled for several miles, eventually leaving the pavement and continuing on a dirt road. Finally he spotted a weathered sign that read HIGH FLYERS. He grinned and took the rutted road indicated by the hand-painted arrow on the sign.

He thought of Bobby Hamm who ran the tiny flying school, air-rental service, and skydiving club. Bobby had been the one who first introduced Rich to Jackie, thus starting the ball rolling on Rich's affiliation with C.A.M.P. Bobby and Rich had been lovers for a time, but the secret nature of Rich's new work had prohibited their seeing each other more than occasionally since Rich's indoctrination. That had been nearly five years before this hot, dusty afternoon. He swung into the parking area in front of the battered hangars.

"Rich!" shouted Bobby. "You old love! How perfectly grand to see you. Say, what in heaven's name brings you...?"

Rich looked around apprehensively, mostly out of habit, but saw no cars other than Bobby's same dilapidated old station wagon on the premises. It was a cloudless day, the sun was bright, and Rich could see no evidence that they were not alone in the desert-like surroundings.

"Bob, my old Bobby," he said as they embraced affectionately. Then, close to Bobby's ear, he whispered: "Are we alone?"

Bobby giggled. "Why, Rich, you old sweetheart did you come all the way out here to see me ... alone?"

"To see you, of course, and on business, too," was the guarded reply. "I'll need to rent your chopper, Bobby. It's ... it may be urgent."

Bobby sighed. "I know, I won't ask you anything about it, you know that. But there's a problem."

"What's that?"

"Well, the rotor went out on the damn thing, and when we were replacing it I dropped the new one from the ladder and it just crashed on the concrete out there. Had to send Larry for a new one. Into Riverside."

"Bobby it's urgent. Really. Maybe life and death. How long do you expect he'll be?"

"Let's see ... he's been gone an hour and a half ... I should say he'll be back in just about another hour or so."

"This Larry—is he...?"

"Oh, he'd like to be, all right. Good-looking boy, too. And I don't mind

telling you I've had him and enjoyed him. But what he really wants is to be taken off an apprentice's salary and become my ... how shall I say it? ... paid companion. He'd keep on working, of course, but the way he sees it I'd just carry him you know, give him whatever money he needed, when he needed it. But you can bet, Richie, you can just bet, it would exceed what I'm paying him now."

Rich felt a twinge of guilt as he realized that his concern for Jackie was now doing battle within him with a well-remembered, five-year-old lust for Bobby.

But what could he do? He couldn't get the chopper till this Larry came back anyway. And he could readily understand why Larry might be in love with Bobby, though it was more likely that the helper was just looking for a meal ticket. Still, Rich had loved Bobby once himself...

Bobby was a very well preserved forty-five. Not too tall, he looked like a man in his early thirties, if that. His hair had been long since bleached almost white by the intense sun of the desert. Yet his skin was still smooth, almost babylike in spite of the weather and climate in general, which so completely leatherizes many who spend their lives in open arid country. The almost-white hair was cut fairly short and blew freely in the wind. If there was any style at all to it, one would have to call it bangs. Bobby wore tight blue coveralls and a red kerchief around his neck.

"All right, Bobby," said Rich. "I guess I have no choice, really. I guess I'll have the use of your copter by waiting here with you sooner than I would by trying to get one somewhere else."

"Besides it'll give us time to ... talk," Bobby said. "After all, Richie, it's been a long time..."

"Yes," said Rich, the lust stirring again. "It has been a long time, Bobs." He uttered the nickname quickly, for the first time in five years.

Rich recalled heading for Los Angeles some six years before and going broke somewhere along the way ... a little town in—was it Utah? From there on he had worked his way very slowly toward what he had been sure would be success in Hollywood, at least as an athletic extra.

He'd had no dreams of stardom. He had just wanted to be on the inside of the movie industry and would have accepted far less than most similar aspirants dream of. But he had spent money a bit too

freely and for the last several hundred miles he had gone through the hard work of finding sweeping and gas pumping and dishwashing jobs in the crummy little desert towns, working for a grub stake here and there, then hitching rides the rest of the way.

Bobby had picked him up along Route 66 and taken him into Los Angeles. Rich had Bobby's business card when the older man left him. He soon found that the life of a would-be bit player was a waiting game and one that required money he could not pick up in the Hollywood area. There just were not enough jobs to go around. There were too many applicants, too many would-be movie actors.

So it had happened that Rich reconsidered the dashing-looking Bobby's offer to help out at High Flyers. It would be a good spot for him to make use of his mechanical abilities and there was no civilization around to soak up his money. When he was on his way to a stake he could start watching the trades again. If he still wanted to. He was no longer so sure that the movie industry was the answer for him but something was. He had this certainty that there was a future moving closer and closer to him, a future that would matter.

Bobby turned him loose with a scrawled schedule of the repairs that were needed, gave him no deadlines, and paid him well. Bobby could afford it. Not that business was so good, with only one chopper and one old Piper Cub to rent out, but Bobby didn't count on the tiny agency for his livelihood. He was independently wealthy, he soon admitted to Rich, and was playing this desert rat hole more for his own satisfaction than anything else. He could easily have fixed the place up and added more equipment, but he seemed to enjoy the seedy condition and friends felt more welcome there, felt more of a clublike atmosphere than they might have felt at a more classy airfield.

It had not happened right away, but slowly Rich had noticed that Bobby was definitely interested in him. The Rich was on his side of the fence anyway but as they were alone most of the time day and night, it was only a matter of time.

Bobby was working on the chopper one day with the motor idling softly. He was up at the top of a small aluminum ladder when Rich approached from behind. Bobby did not hear Rich's voice over the rumble of the motor, and when Rich tapped him gently on the leg Bobby jumped so violently that he lost his balance. He started to fall from the ladder, but Rich's powerful body stopped the fall. As Bobby slid down the hard muscular front of him, Rich hugged him fiercely.

Before either of them truly knew what was happening their mouths were pressed together in a frantic, searching kiss. Bobby felt the hard biceps, digging into them with his fingertips, then sliding his hands around Rich's arms to squeeze the dorsal muscles. The thrill was excruciating to Bobby, whose arousal soon become sufficiently evident to cause Rich's as well.

"I—I wasn't really sure about you," he gasped. "That is, not all the way..."

"Yes, dear Bobby," answered Rich, still holding the other close, his voice throbbing with passion. "All the way."

"Oh, God, Richie—we've wasted so much time!"

"It's all right, Bobs ... may I call you that? Sort of my own personal name for you? It's all right. We've got nothing but time from now on. I won't be going anywhere for a while."

But Rich had gone somewhere, and sooner than either of them had expected. C.A.M.P. had required the services of the High Flyers chopper, and Jackie had helped Rich perform some immediate maintenance before taking off. Bobby had seen the writing on the wall and in fact was by then more interested in a young member of the skydiving club which used his airstrip.

Things had run their natural course, and before he knew it, Rich had become C.A.M.P.'s number-one handyman after a lengthy check of his background, of course. Still, the memories were golden...

* * * *

"Just tell me what I can do to help, Richie," Bobby said, his eyes shining. "You know I'll do anything."

"Just the chopper for the moment, Bobs," Rich said. "I can only tell you that Jackie and his partner on a certain operation are liable to be in difficulty by now. I may be of some help from the air."

"Let's go inside then. We can have a drink while we're waiting for Larry to show up. He shouldn't be too long now."

Inside, the hangar was quite different. It was painted a gleaming white and had bright red trim with a gray floor. Along the far wall Bobby had built a partition which hid a couple of small bedrooms.

"Would would you like to see your old room, Richie? Of course it's Larry's now, but the pictures you framed are still on the wall. Larry and I keep our little supply of libation in there, too."

They entered the small cubicle, simply furnished with a bed, a table, and a comfortable chair. There was a small refrigerator in the corner from which Bobby extracted ice and cold glasses.

"It's still Scotch, isn't it?"

"Fine," Rich said. He drank deeply when the glass was handed to him, knowing he would not have another, in view of the job that might lay ahead, but grateful for this one to steady his nerves during the wait for Larry. And since he was not entirely against a short romp with his old friend, he seated himself on the bed rather than the chair. In another second Bobby joined him and the two of them sat looking at the color prints of classic aircraft which Rich had framed and hung when he worked there.

But that didn't last long. Soon the drinks were downed and they gazed at each other. Bobby's eyes were worried. "I'd never, never ask about your job, Richie. You know that and Jackie knows it, too. That's why I've been able to supply aircraft to your organization once in a while. But it does worry me every time I think about you boys.... I mean, doing what must be dangerous work. Do you ever think you'd like to come back here? I know it would lack all the glamour you've become used to, but really, I could make you very comfortable you know—fix the place up a bit and pay you more than they do, whatever *it* is."

"No, Bobs," said Rich, already beginning to tremble as the older man stroked his hair. "I've found a life that really satisfies me, fulfills me. You know we are dedicated to preserving the safety of people like you and me. It gives me a feeling of worthiness to work toward a day when our kind of life and love will not only not be laughed at but will have its rightful respect in the world."

"I know, Richie. That's one reason I never tried to stand in your way. It must be a—well, a kind of proud feeling."

Rich was prepared to answer, but his words were muffled as Bob drove his mouth forward, clamping against Rich's and probing there with his hot, hungry tongue. As their upper bodies crushed together, their feet shuffled for better purchase on the bare floor and one of the empty glasses clattered across the small room. Neither of them paid any attention.

Slowly they toppled over to sprawl full length on what was now Larry's bed.

"Should we adjourn?" Rich asked. "I mean, to your room? In case Larry should..."

"No, baby. Right here. Larry's getting too big for his shorts anyway. And..." His hand searched for Rich and found him. "And so are you, Richie." Bobby smiled.

Without breaking their relaxed clinch, still stroking and petting animatedly, they removed each other's clothing, each with a skill born of years of practice.

Very soon all that separated the two was underwear.

* * * *

Rich was spent, but he was relieved to find he was not exhausted. He felt a bit ashamed for having taken the time to dally with Bobby, especially when his thoughts were of Jackie, but the interval had done three things for him.

First, it had eased the otherwise interminable wait for Larry's return with the copter part. Then, too, it had eradicated his jealousy over the Jackie-Summers alliance and simultaneously reassured him of his own attractiveness.

They had barely finished their activities when Larry had returned with the rotor and they had installed it quickly. Rich noted with amusement the boy's impatience for Rich to depart and could almost foretell the scene that would take place after he left. A kid like Larry, he thought, would never make a C.A.M.P. agent, not with all those emotions showing all over the place.

Up in the helicopter Rich flew northeast, then due west, then south, east, and north again, making a large circle above the area he had mentally circumscribed as the probable perimeter of the receiver's capabilities.

For the most part he saw nothing suspicious. Here and there was some construction, most of it curious because it seemed to be taking place in the middle of nowhere and therefore to have questionable purpose.

Each pass he made in various directions, he repeated lower and lower the next time, especially when he thought there was something below

that merited closer scrutiny. But there was nothing. For the most part, the search was beginning to look like a waste of precious time.

He tried the portable receiver constantly, but nothing he could use came over it. He began to have serious doubts about his ability to help Jackie now, wondering if Jackie might have chased Summers's captors in some new direction after they had lost contact. He moved his search over toward the San Bernardino Mountains, and now every bit of camping activity seemed a possible answer. Sweat stood out on his forehead as he realized this was turning out to be worse than looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

He began to curse himself for wasting time back at the High Flyers with Bobby, for not just roaring on to find another place to rent a chopper. But would that have helped? Would that have made them any easier to spot down below? He thought desperately of Jackie and of the times they had shared in the privacy of their off-again-on-again love.

No, he thought, Jackie's the one who was always off and on. I've been true to him and have always wanted him, right along, just as I did in the beginning. Oh, Jackie, he railed. What the hell have we done? Why in the world didn't I just follow and keep you within range?

He recalled all the times he and Jackie had gotten together. He knew that Jackie didn't love him in the same way, and he was happy just to be with Jackie. Jackie was impulsive of course, he knew that. Jackie be nimble, Jackie be quick, Jackie be impulsive, Jack jump over ... Jackie, be your mad, gay self and let me love you—but don't let me fall for you.... No, he thought soberly. Can't let that happen. That would just bend my brain, that would just mess up my mind, crack my cranium. I'll have to keep it under control.

And he almost had kept it under control in the time since. Almost. But not quite. He had retained a special feeling for Jackie, and now Jackie was down there someplace, maybe on the trail of Ted Summers. Maybe captured like Summers. Maybe being tortured by the crazy Big Daddy. Maybe ... maybe dead.

Rich broke the thought off. All the maybes he could come up with would do nothing to help Jackie and would only put a tremor in Rich's purposefulness. No, he decided, he would not think any more. He would simply look until he found some sign. He checked the radio receiver again to make sure it was operating at full strength, the gain turned up all the way and the frequency properly set.

Suddenly Rich thought he heard something coming over the receiver's small speaker. He checked his compass and strained his eyes to peer into the glare of the surrounding country. He couldn't see a thing.

The view was better, the searching easier, to the north, to the south and to the east. The sun was beginning to blast him from the west, so he tried the other directions first. But each time he flew in any of those directions the slight signal he was sure was the one he sought began to diminish. He finally concluded that whatever it was had to be coming southwest of his position.

Rich put the helicopter into a climb, so that he could angle toward the earth as he continued the search. In this manner he would require less power and so make less noise, and the forward tilt of the chopper would enable him to shield his eyes against the merciless sun.

It was like he was at the center of a bicycle wheel and he would have to travel outward along each of its southwestern spokes until the signal diminished to nothing then travel backward from the rim to the hub again, and keep it up until he either ran out of fuel or spotted something near the area where the signal was strongest.

An hour passed in this maddening way until finally the signal became a definite, steady beep. But the sun was now truly his enemy. Every shadow of a cloud seemed to look like a building or a dark car and every low-flying bird seemed for a moment to be a man fleeing across the wasteland.

He soon realized that he was just about as far east of Los Angeles as the High Flyer's landing strip, only considerably south of the freeway. A dirt road ran in that direction from the freeway. Jackie had been in a car and so had Summers's kidnappers; wherever they had gone they would have needed a road. Rich eased the chopper into a more southerly sideways drift to follow this one. As the chopper's bubble shifted in the sharp, slanting rays of the sun, he spotted a car.

Rich felt his stomach flip then tighten as he recognized Jackie's Bugatti. Then it was all too clear. There was a dilapidated building a short distance off the road near which were parked three other cars. Why hadn't he spotted this before? He had been too far to the north on every pass he'd made. He guessed that was it.

There was a fence, a big one made of wire, around the place. It was difficult to judge from the air, even at as low an altitude as he dared to fly, what the scale of the layout was, exactly how much room there

was inside the fence. But he was sure he could land there if he had to. He would have to gain altitude and make another pass. And he would have to do it slowly, angling away from the area and climbing gently so as not to make too much noise. If Jackie and Summers were in a tight spot there was no sense making it worse by letting Big Daddy and company know there was a rescuer in the area.

Rich tilted the chopper and began an easy drift to the southwest, climbing slowly at the same time. Within a few miles he turned the craft due south and climbed steeply in the conventional manner. Then he flew northeast to a spot due east of the building and high enough to be sure they would not hear him down there unless they were specifically listening for a helicopter.

As he positioned himself for a slow descent he checked his weapons. Glancing as he did so at the building below he saw a puff of smoke at one of the windows. He could see what looked to be no more than a small dot pass through the window, shortly followed by another.

Armed and loaded for bear, Rich continued to hover where he was, not wanting to swoop down and start shooting at the wrong people.

He cursed softly. Now that he was here and was certain he had located

Jackie's car if not Jackie himself, how was he to know who was who?

What could he do to help?

There was the sound of a gunshot from one of the dots on the ground outside the window and Rich realized that the dots were two people, at least one of them firing at the window they had just come through. As he peered intently one seemed to falter, but they were both getting away from the building as fast as they could.

Now there were several gunshots. Even at his height there was no mistaking the sound. The two people on the ground got farther away from the building and others began to emerge from it, fanning out into a semicircle, obviously trying to create a ring around the first two, probably to be bounded on part of one side by the fence which was now visible to Rich's eyes.

He checked his weapons again and began a slow descent. He could see more clearly now, and there could be no mistake. The first two figures he had seen break from the building had to be Summers and Jackie. It was the only thing that added up.

There were more gunshots, especially from the ring of figures closing in on the two on the ground. Those two seemed to have reached a point in the big yard which had looked like a line in the earth from higher up, but now Rich could see that it was a shallow gully and that one of the two had dragged the other into the gully. They were huddled together, one seemingly trying to protect the other.

The ring of hunters was tightening around them. There were a few more gunshots from them but no answering shots from the two huddled in the gully. Rich wondered why—of course! They were either both hurt or—or out of ammo.

In either case, Rich's job was now clear. He opened the door of the chopper and began a swift descent, finally settling on a speed that would allow him to fire with accuracy and to see just at whom he would be shooting. He felt triumph and fear simultaneously as he drew a bead on the first of the tightening ring who would feel his wrath....

Keeping as low as possible, Jackie and Summers scrambled from their protective gully and headed for the fence, dodging back and forth as they went. The yards stretched before them, and the distance to the fence seemed like a vast wasteland that went on forever.

Summers let out a cry and pitched forward. “I'm hit,” he yelled.

Jackie dove to the ground beside him. “How bad is it?” he asked anxiously, not even daring to raise his head.

"Just a scratch on my leg,” Summers told him through gritted teeth. “But it shot the hell out of my running form."

Jackie looked up in time to see their adversaries circling them again, rapidly cutting off escape. At the moment they were directly in the open, easy targets to pick off. “Come on,” he said, putting an arm around Summers's shoulders. “Let's at least get somewhere where we can put up a fight."

"Don't be crazy,” Summers snapped, pushing his arm away. “Make a break for it yourself. I can hold them off, maybe even long enough for you to get over the fence."

"The hell you say,” Jackie argued. “Come on, this is no place for a domestic quarrel."

"I'm not going anywhere,” Summers insisted stubbornly. “Now get out

of here."

There was no time to argue the question, nor did Jackie have any intention of leaving the other man behind. If they were going to go down they'd go together, and they'd raise all the hell they could on the way.

"Sorry, sweetheart," he said simply, bringing his fist back. He let Summers have it hard in the jaw. The agent's eyes turned glassy and he went out cold.

"That's a good boy," Jackie whispered. He paused for a second, staring down into Summers's handsome face.

"I may never have another chance like this," he said. He lowered his face, his lips meeting Summers's in a brief, gentle kiss.

Springing back into action, he again got a hold on Summers's shoulders and began to crawl, dragging the limp body with him. The sand and rough dirt tore at his naked flesh, and sharp stones cut him repeatedly.

It was slow going, an inch at a time. A few feet away was the shelter of another slight gully. If he could reach there, at least he could put up a good fight for a few minutes. In one hand he clenched Summers's gun.

He made it at last. Sweat pouring from his body, he rolled Summers over into the shallow trough of earth and fell in over him.

Their enemies were closing in, growing bolder now as they realized that only one man was left to combat them. Jackie checked the gun. Only four bullets left and at least twice that many men moving in, firing repeatedly. Even if he made every shot count, there wasn't any hope of getting out of the spot alive.

"All right, you bastards," he hissed, bracing the gun on the ground and sighting carefully on the man nearest them. "Let's play shooting gallery."

His shot hit dead center, and the man leaped into the air as though executing some macabre dance step before falling to the ground.

Beside Jackie, Summers groaned as he returned to consciousness. He opened his eyes, staring blankly about him. "You mean we're still at it?" he said finally.

"Not for much longer," Jackie informed him grimly. "Sorry about your jaw."

"I'll forgive you," he said. "If only because I don't want you to go with a guilty conscience."

Jackie fired again, bringing down another gunman. There were only two shots remaining. "Hang on to that knife," he said. "We may get a chance to use it."

Someone fired from behind. Jackie whirled about and shot, picking off the man who had managed to get within fifteen feet of them. Not far behind him another man ducked for cover. He and Summers exchanged grim looks. Summers clutched the knife tightly in his fist. It was nearly over for them.

There was a shout from the men closing in on them. Jackie raised his head, surprised to see them talking excitedly to one another. One of them pointed angrily skyward. For the first time, Jackie became aware of the droning noise overhead, growing rapidly louder. Even before he looked, he knew what he would see.

"Don't look now," he told Summers, pointing in the direction of the helicopter swooping down toward them, "but the fresh troops have just arrived."

"Fresh troops? You mean..."

Jackie nodded, his face breaking into a broad smile. "Unless I miss my guess, Rich is about to give them hell for us."

As though on cue, Rich in the helicopter opened fire on the gunmen on the ground. The thugs scattered, making a dash back toward the building. There were still enough of them to outnumber Rich and Jackie and Summers, and if they had been able to take cover there the results might have been different. But in all the excitement everyone had forgotten that the building was wired to blow up.

Which it did just then.

After that there was nothing but the mopping up. By the time Upton and his men had arrived by car it was all over. The two gangsters left standing had surrendered despondently and were now bound hand and foot waiting to be carted off. Of Big Daddy there was no trace the building in which she had last been seen was nothing but a pile of rubble.

Rich had landed just minutes after the explosion, striding rapidly to the spot where Jackie and Summers sat waiting.

"Must have been quite a party," he commented as he walked up, looking the two nude bodies up and down with a grin.

"It has been," Jackie said. "Take off your clothes and join us."

"Don't bother," Summers disagreed. "I don't know about your blond wonder here, but if I have to sit on this hot sand with my bare bottom much longer I'm going to be permanently out of commission."

"God forbid," Jackie exclaimed, scrambling to his feet. "Come on, let's fly away from all this."

Rich helped him get Summers to the copter. "By the way," Jackie said as they walked, "how in the hell did you manage to find us?"

"When you started off on their trail I figured you might need some help. I took to the air to try and track you. I've been circling around ever since, combing every road east of the city, trying to pick up your signal. Once I got that it was easy."

"I'm just glad you got it when you did," Jackie commented. "We had one shot left between us." To emphasize the remark he aimed the gun at the ground and fired. There was a metallic click.

"Well, I'll be," he swore softly. "I thought there were four bullets in that silly thing."

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Chapter 13

There was little left of the case but the cleaning-up operations. Jackie and Summers were only too happy to leave that task to Upton and his men. Rich carried them back to the city in the copter.

"See that someone brings my car back," Jackie said, "and drop us at my apartment. I think I'm speaking for both of us when I say that we d like a nice rest. Tell Upton if he shows his face at my door before noon tomorrow I'll shoot it off."

"And that goes for anyone else," Summers chimed in. "I plan to forget the world exists until then."

Having seen them safely delivered at the apartment and after neatly dressing their wounds, Rich left them as instructed.

Without bothering to discard the shorts that Rich had provided them for the trip back, both agents fell wearily across the bed in Jackie's room. "If you want me to use my own bed," Summers told Jackie in a tired voice, "you're going to have to carry me in there."

"Just don't snore," Jackie warned him in a mumble.

Summers grinned and stirred to drop an arm affectionately about the slender shoulders near him. For an answer Jackie grunted faintly and nestled his head in the crook of the muscular arm. Seconds later they were both sound asleep.

* * * *

Promptly at noon the following day Rich appeared at the apartment with Upton in tow. Refreshed by a long sleep, both Jackie and Summers had wakened early to bathe and loaf about the apartment. Both had been a little surprised to find themselves in each other's arms when they awoke.

"You know, it's very funny," Summers said, emerging naked from a steaming shower, "but when you knocked me cold back there in the desert I had the strangest dream. I dreamed you were kissing me."

Jackie, sprawled nakedly across the bed, only smiled silently up at

him. Summers's initial reaction had been to blush, but that had been quickly replaced by a grin of amusement and an expression that Jackie had not yet seen on his handsome face.

"Would it have mattered?" Jackie asked. "I mean, if it was a dream or real?"

"I like to know what's happening," Summers said. He stepped closer to the bed, his eyes moving up and down Jackie's slender, naked body. Jackie recognized the expression in his eyes—it was one of desire.

He lifted one hand in an invitation. "You're awake now," he said softly.

Summers hesitated for a second, still timid. Then, taking the hand in his own, he lowered himself slowly to the bed, his eyes glued to Jackie's. He did not attempt to hold back as Jackie's lips rose to his. It was crazy as all hell, he knew, but he was enjoying it. His body was responding to the soft warmth of Jackie in his arms.

He let Jackie lead him, rolling obediently onto his back, spreading apart his long legs as Jackie knelt and took Summers into his mouth.

He would probably never do any of this again nor even want to. Certainly he would not desire it with anyone else. But this was now and he was with Jackie and whatever inhibitions he had suffered in the past were gone now for this brief space of time—perhaps he had left them behind in the desert when they had faced death together.

"I want to satisfy you," he whispered, not even embarrassed at his own audacity.

Jackie raised his eyes. "First time?" he asked. "It'll hurt," he warned when Ted nodded.

"About time I knew how it felt to be on the welcoming end, wouldn't you say?" Summers said with a grin. He parted his legs more widely.

Jackie was right, it did hurt—and yet at the same time there was something exciting and new about it. He thought of something he had read in the past, that everyone, man and woman, has the elements of both passivity and activity within him or her, each derives certain pleasures from both giving and receiving. He was now receiving, yet at the same time giving of himself in a new way.

He stopped philosophizing, however, as Jackie bent, taking him into

his mouth again. Summers forgot everything, surrendering himself to an aura of pure sensation and pleasure that carried him swiftly to an unforgettable peak, wild and unique, an experience that he had never known before and knew he would never encounter again.

* * * *

"It's all pretty well mopped up," Rich announced when he arrived. "Your car's in the garage, all cleaned again, although it needed a rest, too, after the workout you gave it."

"What about Big Daddy?" Jackie asked. "I sort of wished I could have taken care of her myself."

Rich shrugged. "Not a trace," he said.

"But we did round up the rest of them," Upton said. "They'll be on ice for a long time, if you'll pardon the pun."

Jackie served fresh coffee and they sat around while he and Summers explained the entire operation to Upton, prompting each other with various details as they talked.

"Sounds like you did a good job," Upton said finally, beaming with pleasure.

"It's easy when you've got a good partner," Summers told him, giving Jackie the benefit of a warm smile.

"I'll second that," Jackie agreed.

"Well, Ted," Upton said finally, standing, "looks like you and I should be getting on our way. Can I give you a lift to the airport?"

"Sure, I guess so," Summers answered without enthusiasm. They all stood, and Summers shook Jackie's hand firmly. "It's been fun," he said. "I hope we can work on another case some day."

"It would be a pleasure," Jackie assured him.

On the way past the large credenza near the door, Summers paused as he saw the familiar wooden statue. "There's just one thing that puzzles me," he said, holding the object up. "I still don't know what this thing is."

"Jackie's too modest to tell you," Rich answered him. "It was a trophy give him by C.A.M.P., for outstanding service."

Summers nodded. “I see. But I still don't understand all these scratches on the sides."

"Scratches?” Rich was grinning broadly. “Didn't anyone tell you? Those aren't scratches, they're notches."

"Notches?” Summers repeated. It took him a moment to comprehend. His face turned crimson as he stared at the freshly cut notch at the base of the statue. There was a dull slap as the pillow Jackie threw from the sofa caught Rich aside the head.

"I guess we'd better go,” Summers mumbled, unable to face Upton, who was also grinning.

Alone in the apartment Rich snapped his fingers and turned to Jackie. “You forgot the reward,” he said.

Jackie smiled and stretched his arms lazily. “Oh, no, I didn't. I got that this morning."

"I meant the money,” Rich answered curtly.

Outside in the car, Summers was silent as he rode toward the airport with Upton. It was something of a blow to the ego to become a “notch” on someone's trophy. As his annoyance wore off, however, his better nature came to the fore and eventually he began to smile. At least, he thought with amusement, he wasn't the first notch. And in all likelihood he wouldn't be the last, either.

"If it's any consolation to you,” Upton said quietly without turning to look at him, “there's a very old notch on that thing, one of the first ones—I earned it quite some time back."

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Holiday Gay

Chapter 1

There was something about the holiday season and Christmastime that Jackie Holmes always especially liked. Most of all it was evenings like this one, set aside for trimming the tree. Here he was in a cozy warm apartment. The fire was blazing brightly in the fireplace. A tall fir tree had been placed in its stand and was already saturating the room with its delicious scent. Hot toddies had gone a long way to putting him in a dreamy mood. To make the picture complete he had the benefit of delightful company. Beside him was one of those beautiful young men one usually just dreams about tall, husky, with gray eyes behind long lashes, olive-hued skin, and an erotically curved mouth. The picture couldn't have been more perfect.

"How do you like those balls?"

"Perfect," Jackie murmured appreciatively. He traced a finger over one of them.

"What about this? Do you think it's too big?"

"Not at all. It looks better standing, though, than it did hanging. I wish we could put it on top of the tree."

His companion laughed, a deep throaty sound that sent a shiver up Jackie's spine. "Too much weight, I'm afraid. It would bend the tree down."

"I guess you're right. But the color's perfect—that deep red crown." Jackie paused for a moment, devoting himself to his efforts.

"That's better," his friend surveyed the results of the efforts. "That gives it a shiny look, makes it glisten. I think that's more appropriate."

Jackie frowned thoughtfully. "Maybe just a little more," he suggested. After a moment, he added, "Christmas just isn't Christmas without sweets. Hard candy at that."

"I don't know when I've enjoyed the season more. I almost wish it

were Christmas Eve. That part about going off up the chimney always gets to me."

"Sounds like a waste to me," Jackie answered. He turned slightly on the bearskin rug and his glance fell momentarily on the tall Christmas tree. Beside it, still unopened, was the large trunk in which he always stored the decorations. Oh well, he thought philosophically, he could always trim it tomorrow. As it turned out he had far more urgent things to tend to this evening.

He looked back at his companion. Like Jackie, Lorenzo was naked, reclining lazily on the soft rug. He smiled, his dark lips parting to reveal dazzling, even teeth. In the firelight his satiny skin gleamed maddeningly. Jackie reached out to the broad chest and ran one finger lightly over a brown nipple. His finger slipped downward over the rippling surface of a brown stomach. It curled in the thick patch of gleaming black hair, and then it was back to its previous source of pleasure.

A massive arm moved around him, pulling him close again, and Jackie felt himself drawn into the gray depths of those haunting eyes. His lips were crushed beneath another pair, and then a warm tongue invaded his mouth. Jackie shivered as a strong male hand stroked his back, making its way downward.

"Beautiful box," Lorenzo managed to whisper. "I wouldn't mind getting something of that."

"I hope you don't want to wait till Christmas." Jackie tensed momentarily and then relaxed to the firm, confident exploration that was taking place. Sexually he regarded himself as a seasoned traveler, and the seasoned traveler, he had learned from experience, had to be prepared to travel whatever route necessary to reach his destination. At times that had meant traveling virgin territory—but not in this instance.

He was rolled gently over onto his back. For a moment they lay like that, the powerful weight of Lorenzo's body crushing him down against the rug. It lifted then, and he felt his legs being raised into the air, balanced on wide, thickly muscled shoulders. He opened his eyes to smile up into Lorenzo's eager, thrilled face.

"Should I say please?" his companion wanted to know.

"Save your breath for 'thank you,'" Jackie informed him. They kissed, and he felt the first tentative probings, then a slowly increasing

pressure. He was reminded for a brief second of his companion's impressive size, but the memory was not an unpleasant one. He moaned softly, more from pleasure than from pain, and then he felt himself filling up, seeming to swell with pleasure as the sensations moved rigidly deeper.

Lorenzo kissed him and then buried his face in Jackie's hair, gasping hoarsely. “Dio, it's never been like this. I'm in heaven."

"I'll be there myself by the time this is finished,” Jackie informed him. “Because I think I'm going to have the hell screwed out of me."

He was right in his expectations. Until now it had been forceful but cautious. It moved on until its journey was completed, the lovely ornaments that Jackie had admired before brushing gently against the smoothness of his taut buttocks. Then, scattering goosebumps over his flesh, Jackie felt it withdrawing slowly, slowly—only to come crushing into him again, this time with an intense ferocity.

Jackie moaned again, arching upward off the rug. “Careful of the rib cage,” he managed to gasp as the plunging became a roller-coaster ride at breakneck speed.

"Ah, ah,” Lorenzo sighed and sobbed, hurling himself against his partner. “So beautiful, so unbelievable, it's like a miracle."

Then, so abruptly that it was shocking, he came to a complete stop. “It is a miracle!” he exclaimed, his eyes wide with astonishment. “Listen, I hear bells!"

For the first time Jackie heard them, too, filtering through the haze of his arousal—chimes actually, a special signal that only he would understand. “Christ!” he swore aloud.

This exclamation only increased his partner's consternation. “Then it is truly a miracle, a virgin birth—the second coming!"

"Hardly virgin,” Jackie reminded him. “Although any birth from this would certainly be a miracle. Anyway, I think we can forget about coming.” He extricated himself from the now passive embrace of his befuddled partner. “Don't go away,” he said, heading with reluctance toward his bedroom.

Annoying though it might be, he could not ignore the summons of the chimes. His training on that score had been thorough, and he was dedicated to his duty. In the bedroom he went directly to the long,

low dresser. On its surface was a figurine of a naked youth seated. Its appearance suggested nothing more than a piece of decorative art, but in reality it was more than that. Jackie lifted it from the surface of the dresser, knowing that a concealed switch would start it operating at once. He turned the bottom side up and lifted it to his face. On this surface too it appeared perfectly innocent, but concealed cleverly within the posterior anatomy of the figurine was a miniature speaker, into which he now spoke in low, terse terms.

"Holmes here," he addressed the porcelain buttocks. They were, he decided, a poor substitute for the lovely pair he had so recently been fondling.

"Jackie?" He recognized the familiar bass voice at once.

"Yes, Rich. What's up?"

"Maybe I should ask you that," the voice chuckled from the area of the porcelain crotch. "Your voice has that come hither sound."

"Hither, thither how can I get around to coming anywhere when these damned chimes are always going off before I do?"

"Sorry about that," Rich said, then grew sober. "But this is really hot. Upton's called, he wants to see you pronto. Used Contact Hustler."

Jackie's annoyance paled—Contact Hustler meant something big. "I'm on my way," he answered. Without waiting for further comment he replaced the figure on the dresser and started at once back to the living room.

Lorenzo was still bare on the bearskin rug, looking confused by the entire situation. "Sorry," Jackie said as he entered the room, "but that was business, big business. I'll have to go out."

"What about this big business?" Lorenzo asked, indicating. For all the distraction, his business was still up and throbbing painfully.

Jackie went past him to the table where he had left his gift-wrapping paraphernalia. He selected a large ribbon with a how and, coming back to his companion, slipped it neatly around the prominent portion of Lorenzo's anatomy. "Put it under the tree," he suggested. "I'll be back to open it later, okay?"

In the bedroom Jackie dressed rapidly. As he did so, the slender blond seemed to undergo a transformation. Naked and away from his work

there was little about Jackie Holmes to indicate his homosexuality. He was small and slender, but one quickly recognized the taut muscles rippling beneath the surface of his flesh. His daily routine included a program that would have exhausted even the finest athletes. Moreover, he utilized every conceivable exercise to train his various facilities, racing through complex mathematical equations in his mind, testing his senses of hearing and smell, and even reading daily in Braille to keep his touch keen. Few men could match the abilities of this slender, innocent-looking blond.

As he dressed and prepared for “work,” however, he donned another personality along with his clothes. Jackie Holmes—good-looking, masculine, dynamic—mysteriously became a thin, limp-wristed homosexual. His blond hair was pulled down to flop over his forehead. He pinched his cheeks to a bright redness to give the impression of makeup. He adopted mannerisms and gestures typical of a certain type of homosexual known as a “queen."

In the end he looked anything but masculine or dynamic. Most important, he looked utterly and completely harmless. It was a deliberate facade, one that had proved time and again invaluable to his work. In disguising his true personality, Jackie was disguising his line of work as well. The small, effeminate, blond boy who stood a few minutes later before the mirror was in fact a secret agent of a most mysterious and unique sort. His true identity remained known to only a few, but his reputation spread throughout the world, giving hope to many unfortunate souls and striking fear in the hearts of countless wrongdoers. To these people he was not known as Jackie Holmes. To them he was simply the Man from C.A.M.P.

A private elevator whisked Jackie from his apartment to the garage of the building. Here, too, a facade was kept, for the building appeared to be an ordinary apartment house with a basement garage and Jackie's apartment as a penthouse. In fact, the entire building was his, the other apartments empty dummies, and the long stalls of cars in the basement were all a part of Jackie's private collection.

He hesitated for a moment and then headed for one of the stalls. The vehicle he had chosen was nearly as unique as its driver. Its styling was audacious, exaggerated shapes and lines flowing into a sensual whole. The long hood was a wonderland of louvers and rivets and bright shiny things. It sported giant wire wheels and curling, chrome-plated external exhaust pipes.

Jackie opened the door and climbed into the Mercedes. The rim of the

massive steering wheel was as thick as the banister rail of a stairway. It rumbled to life with a deep alto sound from the exhausts. A minute later he had backed it around and was out of the garage, turning in the direction of Hollywood.

Traffic was thick and slow moving. It was the Christmas season, and from the number of cars and pedestrians still on the streets it seemed as if the entire population of Los Angeles had chosen this particular evening to do their shopping. Jackie swerved skillfully in and out of the traffic, making his way rapidly into the heart of Hollywood proper. Here the traffic was even worse. He turned onto a side street, spotted a parking place, and swooped into it. From here he walked a block and a half to Hollywood Boulevard.

With the increase in pedestrian traffic, the number of hustlers on the boulevard had increased as well. The abundance of handsome, animalistic young men had created an increase in the number of queens flitting up and down the sidewalks. It was a part of the holiday scene rarely considered by the average person but one with which Jackie was quite familiar. He could see at once the wisdom of using this particular method of contact with the man he was meeting. No one would give a second thought to the sight of two men meeting on this street, on this night. It was happening all about him even as he walked. Eager eyes darted about, lighting on an interesting prospect and taking a rapid inventory. A smile, a nod, two strangers pause. There is a brief conversation, and then they drift off to a side street, a car, a waiting apartment.

Down the street the crowd of hustlers was like a swarm. This was “hustler's corner” in front of the Silver Chalice coffee shop. Jackie was aware of the many pairs of eyes on him as he sauntered into the throng. Some of them were interested, some just curious. Some glanced down to the carefully arranged bulge at the crotch of his trousers. Others studied his clothes and jewelry, silently estimating his financial worth.

Jackie stopped at the corner, glancing around with only slight interest, and then leaned leisurely against the wall of the building. From here he could survey the entire scene with only a slight turn of his head: Hollywood Boulevard in both directions, the crowds outside the Silver Chalice, the open-air magazine stand on the side street. He was a witness to the scene and at the same time a part of it. No sooner had he stopped and leaned than he became an item of merchandise for the consideration of the passing buyers.

Jackie returned some of the glances but without encouraging them. He had no interest in finding a sex partner here, but he did have to keep up the pretense of being one of the band of flesh peddlers.

Every type was represented in the passing parade—tall men, short men, some that didn't seem to be men at all. There were those who looked like athletes and teachers and dancers and even the vice squad, the legal lavender that combined business and pleasure in cruising with the gays—they were wont to have their pleasure before they made their arrests. Talk about having your cake and having it eaten, too!

Jackie took a second glance at one of the approaching figures. This one, he thought to himself, couldn't have looked more like an accountant in some dingy, dimly lit office. He was probably in his thirties, but he looked older. He was balding and showing a tendency toward fat, especially around the waist. Anything but a perfect physical specimen, Jackie decided with amusement, noting the cheap brown suit badly in need of pressing.

The man had drawn nearer, was almost in front of him. Jackie could see that beyond the thick glasses he wore the man's brown eyes were watching him speculatively. Jackie gave the sort of vague, nearly imperceptible response common in such situations—a ghost of a smile, the faintest of nods. This was part of the game. Then, not surprisingly, the brown suit veered and the man stopped directly in front of him, standing as close as discretion permitted. He held an unlighted cigarette in one hand and he lifted that now to his mouth, although Jackie was fully aware that this, too, was only part of the game.

"Got a match?"

Wordlessly Jackie removed a pack of matches from his pocket and indifferently handed them to the speaker. The man lit his cigarette. The brown eyes continued to watch Jackie through the flicker of light.

"All alone?" Brown suit wanted to know. Jackie was aware of the fact that some of the others around them were watching, observing the action.

"I was," Jackie replied. "Looks like I've got company."

Jackie ran a tongue suggestively over his lips and scratched slightly at his bulging crotch. Then, without further comment, he turned and started down the street. Brown suit joined him. The others on the corner watched for a minute or two, some of them disappointed—

brown suit had looked like an easy customer. Others watched Jackie's fanny, bouncing slightly in skintight trousers. Some were just curious. But the interest of all was short-lived. By the time Jackie and his companion had gone twenty feet no one was watching them any longer.

"This way," Jackie said at the corner. They were on the side street where he had parked his car. They walked in silence for another block.

"This is it," Jackie said, indicating the Mercedes.

"What's this one?" his companion wanted to know, admiring the racy lines of the car.

"Mercedes, S model, 1928," Jackie said. He started up the motor, and his companion was no sooner in the car than they had started off. Jackie turned south to Sunset Boulevard and they were caught up in a thick river of cars heading west, one of the countless moving vehicles on the street. They were literally surrounded by thousands of people and they couldn't have been more isolated.

"Okay, Lou," Jackie said finally, paying only token attention to his driving. "Let's have it. Rich said it was something big."

Lou Upton shifted slightly in his seat so that he was facing Jackie. He had shed the facade of mediocrity, and the eyes behind the lenses were now shrewd and hard. They belonged, as Jackie well knew, to one of Interpol's finest agents, one with whom Jackie had worked on numerous assignments before.

"It is big," he answered, "although frankly I don't know yet just how big." He paused to light a cigarette. "Ever hear of the Levinstein diamond collection?"

"Who hasn't? It's the world's largest the last I heard. Say, isn't that in town now? I thought I heard that it was on display..."

"At Ballocks department store on Wilshire," Upton agreed. "Or at least it was."

"Was?" Jackie shot a glance at his companion. "You don't mean..."

Upton nodded his head grimly. "It's been stolen—every last carat of it. Necklaces, brooches, stickpins, tiaras—all gone."

Jackie gasped in amazement. If Upton was right, this was undoubtedly the biggest jewel robbery of all time. “But how could that be? There's been nothing in the papers about the theft."

"Look at it this way. If you'd borrowed the world's largest diamond collection from the Sheik of Ruwait to put on display in your store and it got stolen, would you be eager for a lot of publicity before you had a chance to get it back?"

"Well, you're right there. But surely someone must have noticed that it's gone. I mean, it was on display at their head store. You can't just explain away its disappearance."

Upton sighed. “In a way, I suppose we can thank the thief for that. They provided the perfect cover-up exact duplicates of the entire collection, perfect copies."

"You mean they switched collections?"

"Exactly. The worst thing is we don't even know when. The real stones were there three days ago. Today when the special guards started their routine check they discovered that they were guarding a bunch of worthless fakes, and someone has made off with two hundred million dollars worth of diamonds."

Jackie was aghast. “I've never heard anything like it,” was all he could manage to say for a moment. He thought about it for a minute. “But how could they have done it? That would make a heck of a large bundle to carry out the door, even in the Christmas shopping rush."

"That's the real crazy part,” Lou Upton continued. “I don't think they have taken the jewels out of the store."

The traffic had come to a standstill, solid lines of cars in every lane, none of them moving. Jackie lit a cigarette for himself and turned to Lou. “What makes you think that?"

"It's the only logical answer,” Lou replied. “Look, we both know Ballocks has the finest security guard system in the world. And they intensify it during the Christmas season. Every purchase is packaged and then tagged, and there are at least two guards at every door to make sure no one gets out with a package that isn't tagged."

"But if it were an inside job they could package the diamonds themselves and then tag them."

Lou shook his head. “With that large a collection they'd have to have every sales clerk in the store in on it. Anyway, the tags are code numbered and records kept of them. They correspond to sales slips and we've checked that already. There's been no missing tags and no evidence of counterfeiting. So you see, the diamonds still have to be in the store. That's why we're working on it, of course, although we'd have been called in anyway. I don't have to tell you this is vitally important from a diplomatic standpoint. The sheik is one of the few pro-Western figures in Middle East politics. Something like this could blow the balance of power all to hell. But to make it more complicated the local police have their hands tied. You see, until the diamonds are taken from the store they haven't been legally stolen."

"You're right.” Jackie frowned. “But if they're inside the store it should be a simple matter. Lock the store up for the day and search it till you find them."

"Do you think we haven't already taken the place apart? But there isn't a trace. It's as though they disappeared into thin air."

"I see.” The traffic had started moving again. Jackie shifted gears, letting the Mercedes roll slowly forward. “Well, it's an intriguing case, I must admit. But I don't see offhand just where we come into it."

"From two standpoints. First, as I said, the local police have their hands tied, and in a sense so do we. But your organization can work more freely in such matters. Second, we found a clue I thought would interest you very much.” He paused, obviously waiting for Jackie to coax the information out of him.

"Okay, you know I'm curious,” Jackie responded. “What did you find?"

Upton removed an envelope from his pocket. “Whoever switched the jewels dropped something in one of the display cases—a feather.” He opened the envelope and removed a small white feather from it. Even in the dim glow, Jackie could clearly see its peculiar qualities. Although white, it glimmered iridescently as if it were made of mother-of-pearl, and its very tip was a slash of shocking crimson. He had seen such plumage before, but that had been long in the past.

"A Pearly Freebird.” He gasped in amazement.

"Right a cock,” Upton amended. “The hen, if you remember, is brown and green. Only the male is pearly."

Jackie remembered well despite the passing of years. Once while

traveling through the Amazon jungles he had been fortunate enough to have seen a Freecock winging swiftly by. He could still hear its plaintive call sounding like “vee dee ... vee deee.... “But that was in the past. So far as the world of science was concerned the Freebird was extinct now. There was only one possible source, and that was shrouded in mystery, known to only a few persons such as himself.

"Birdie Wing,” he said aloud. Even the speaking of that name sent a shudder through him. “And the Swallow Children."

"You're right,” Upton said grimly. “And it makes sense, doesn't it? Who else would pull such a large-scale job and do it with such apparent success? Only the greediest and most brilliant of criminal minds could have even conceived the idea."

Jackie nodded, but he did not answer at once. His mind was working busily. He knew now why Upton had called on him. Who else would he have turned to, dealing with such an adversary, but Birdie Wing's arch enemy C.A.M.P.?

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Chapter 2

Of all the many police-type organizations throughout the world, C.A.M.P. was easily one of the most unique and one of the most mysterious. In addition, although it remained unknown to most people, C.A.M.P. was also one of the most powerful and far reaching.

For Jackie Holmes, the relationship with C.A.M.P. had begun many years before, when Jackie was little more than a teenager and the heir to a vast fortune left to him when his parents were killed simultaneously in an accident. The multimillionaire orphan had needed a friend and had found one in one of his teachers, an older man upon whom Jackie quickly developed an immense crush. This teacher appeared in every way the paragon of virtue, and Jackie's affection for his idol was a combination of young love, respect, and admiration.

But suddenly something had gone wrong. Although Jackie couldn't understand it, he began to see a change in the man he idolized. His friend had become nervous, irritable. He lost weight and gave every indication of suffering through some dreadful ordeal. It ended tragically in the suicide of the teacher. Not until afterward did Jackie learn the explanation. His idol had been homosexual and had fallen prey to a ruthless blackmailer, who had bled him dry and finally driven him in despair to take his own life.

The young orphan, with tears streaming down his cheeks, prayed for some means of opposing such ruthless individuals as the ones who had caused the death of his friend. As if in answer to his prayers, Jackie was soon approached by a stranger who proved to be a representative of the then-fledgling C.A.M.P. Somehow he knew of Jackie's recent loss and had sensed a valuable ally in the wealthy young man.

He explained that C.A.M.P. was an underground organization dedicated to the protection and advancement of homosexuals. Unlike various homosexual clubs around the world, C.A.M.P. was a vast society with many purposes and functions. Already, High Camp, the headquarters of the group, had established numerous branches. Some of them dealt with the social problems of homosexuals. Some worked in legal fields to better the lot of homosexuals. There were highly organized research departments and scientific laboratories, and these

branches employed the finest minds of the homosexual world.

But it was another branch that most interested Jackie—the police branch. These were the agents, often unknown even to one another, working in many guises and from numerous branch offices, who dedicated their lives to protecting homosexuals and to fighting the vicious creatures who preyed on helpless people.

From the very first Jackie Holmes committed himself to this branch of the organization. He had never regretted his decision, although on countless occasions it had come close to costing him his life. Over the years he had fought against blackmailers, perverts, thieves, and murderers. Although C.A.M.P. theoretically worked outside the law, Jackie had many times worked with numerous police organizations in his own country and abroad. He had helped Upton uncover a counterfeit diamond ring operated by the dangerous Big Daddy. He had numerous times tangled with the incredibly cruel Tiger Bey, head of B.U.T.C.H., an organization dedicated to crushing homosexuality. He had posed as a female spy to foil an assassination plot and had broken up a kidnapping ring that stole pretty young boys to work in brothels throughout the world.

Of all Jackie's adversaries, however, none chilled the blood so thoroughly as the infamous Birdie Wing. At the head of a fiendish gang known as the Swallows, Birdie ran his own homosexual organization, but it was one dedicated to crime on a grand scale. He had nearly succeeded in a revolution that would have put his gang in control of an entire Latin American republic, and only the intervention of C.A.M.P. had stopped this nefarious plot. There had been other incidents as well, all as terrible, as “grand scale” as that one, and now it was perfectly logical that Birdie Wing should be the one to attempt a theft as incredible as the theft of the Levinstein diamond collection. No other criminal would even have considered the idea.

The evidence of the Freecock feather was indisputable. For over a decade the Pearly Freebird had been considered extinct. But Jackie knew, as did a few others in the police field, that one person still managed to breed the rare bird for his own collection Birdie Wing. The plumage of the Freecock was valued above all others, even more so now for its rarity, and it was no doubt partially for this reason that Birdie's clothing was invariably trimmed in Freecock plumage. But there was more to it than that, Jackie was convinced. He was certain Birdie had deliberately cornered the market on the plumage, somehow killing off any other sources of supply, so that someday he could make a vast fortune from his own supply. It was one scheme that Jackie had

as yet been unable to foil. To do so he would have to bring about the downfall of Birdie himself, and thus far that had been impossible to do.

"So you can see," Upton was saying, "why we called on you and why we regarded this as so serious."

"Yes, of course," Jackie agreed. He had turned off Sunset Boulevard now and was circling back toward Hollywood. "You can rest assured C.A.M.P. will take the assignment. When I drop you off I'll head straight for the office and get to work on it at once."

"I was hoping that would be the verdict," Upton said with a grin.

Jackie dropped Upton near his own car. From there the slim blond drove quickly across town, following a familiar route. A short time later he pulled to the curb and again parked the Mercedes, this time in front of a seedy-looking bar. A small sign wearily proclaimed the name of the place—The Round Up.

The Round Up was not a particularly attractive place, neither on the outside nor the inside. The interior was in near darkness, scarcely affected by the dim lighting. The counter was battered, the stools torn and patched. The sawdust covering the floor gave no indication of having been swept in months, and the walls were covered with beefcake pictures of nude and nearly nude males, although the pictures were tattered and yellowed with age. It was a gay bar, immediately recognizable as such, but a far cry from the attractive, stylish places often frequented by homosexuals. These men gave the impression of being human debris, people who cared little for niceties or discretion.

Jackie's was a familiar face. The patrons glanced in his direction as he entered, but they had long since learned that he was uninterested in their advances. He got nothing more than cursory glances from them, and by the time he had reached the rear of the room they had apparently forgotten his presence.

Jackie went through a curtained doorway into a short hallway. He entered the room marked MEN. It was empty now. He went without pausing past the urinals to the stalls in the rear. One of them was posted OUT OF ORDER. Ignoring the sign, he stepped inside and quietly lifted the lid of the toilet tank, plunging his hand down into the water. After a moment of fumbling he found the switch he wanted and turned it. There was a momentary pause, then the rear wall

swung open.

Jackie stepped through the opening into a patch of darkness. The secret door closed after him and seconds later another opened before him. He stepped through, and it too swung silently closed.

It was like stepping into another world. From the dingy rest room of a rundown bar Jackie had stepped into an elegant apartment. Overhead, crystal chandeliers glittered brightly. Candles cast their romantic shadows on velvet-covered walls. Twin sofas covered in pale charmeuse flanked a fireplace in which a fire was burning low. He had entered a chamber known only to his most intimate associates, the men who had shared his adventures. This was one of the many branch offices of C.A.M.P., the one from which Jackie worked. It was his contact with the top headquarters, High Camp, whose location was unknown even to the organization's agents.

Rich, his working partner, was already there. Rich served as liaison between Jackie and High Camp. He lived here, in fact, in this luxurious suite of rooms, providing Jackie with whatever assistance or information he needed while Jackie did the “outside” work. It was C.A.M.P.'s standard operating procedure. All agents worked in pairs, one field man and one backup man. Beyond this spacious living room was probably the world's most sophisticated electronic equipment, geared to provide any piece of information within seconds. It was linked, too, with High Camp's complex setup.

Unlike Jackie, Rich would probably never be suspected of being homosexual. He looked more like a football player or something of that sort. He was tall, six foot five inches, and built like a bull, handsome in a rugged brutish way.

Rich smiled in greeting, obviously delighted to see the blond agent. “Hi, how'd it go with Upton?"

"He was right, it's something big,” Jackie responded, seating himself on one of the sofas. Rich had poured him a cognac which he handed to Jackie now. As he sipped, Jackie started his explanation of the meeting with Upton and the assignment they had been given.

"Whew,” Rich gasped when the explanation was completed. “This is something. Birdie Wing on the loose again. High Camp will want to know about this.” He started from the room.

"While you're at it,” Jackie stopped him, “we may as well start the gears moving. Upton said the store has been searched thoroughly, but

with all due respect, I think our boys are better. Have a crew sent there first thing in the morning to give the place a real going over. And tell them not to come back without tiaras."

Rich grinned and left to carry out the instructions. Jackie kicked his shoes off and sat sipping his cognac and staring thoughtfully into the fire. His mind was busy sifting through what little he knew about the case. Upton had seemed convinced that the diamonds were still inside the exclusive department store. But if so, where were they? Despite his instructions to Rich, he was aware that Upton's men were highly efficient. It seemed unlikely that their search had been haphazard. Or was Upton wrong? Had the diamonds somehow been removed from the store—and if so, how?

Rich reentered the room silently. Jackie was unaware of his presence until he felt huge, powerful hands on his shoulders, massaging with astonishing gentleness.

"Are you staying the night?" Rich asked in a soft voice.

Jackie recognized the tone at once. He leaned back, raising his eyes to meet Rich's, and he saw the unspoken plea there. He smiled affectionately, flattered by the desire that this handsome animal of a man felt for him. Nor was it only one sided, for Rich held a unique place in Jackie's affections, one Jackie couldn't have explained to anyone else, not even Rich. Maybe, he thought, he didn't even understand it himself.

"Better not," he said apologetically. "I should get home and..."

His eyes suddenly widened. "Good grief!" he exclaimed, jumping up. "I forgot, I left a present under the tree."

"But it's not Christmas yet," Rich called after him as Jackie started hurriedly toward the door.

"This one won't keep," Jackie yelled back. "It'll spoil if I don't get it eaten."

"What is it, fruit or something?"

"I'll say," was Jackie's answer as he went out the secret door.

* * * *

The apartment was quiet when Jackie reentered. Lorenzo was still

under the thick branches of the Christmas tree. Sophie, Jackie's miniature white poodle, was sleeping near him. She jumped up and ran to greet her master. Lorenzo remained sound asleep. He had, Jackie observed as he drew near, showered and freshened up, but he had carefully replaced the bow that Jackie had left on him.

"Lovely," Jackie thought, smiling down at the naked form. He quickly shed his own clothes, moving quietly, then knelt on the floor over the unmoving form. He kissed the half-parted lips gently. Lorenzo stirred slightly.

Jackie's lips moved downward across the sculptured chest. He explored the navel then moved on to the dark nest where limp flesh had already begun to lengthen and stir. He kissed the tip of it, then drew it lovingly into his mouth. The hips moved slightly, thrusting upward eagerly. Jackie glanced up to see Lorenzo smiling down at him. Jackie interrupted himself long enough to whisper, "Merry Christmas."

It was slow and lazy at first. In this as in most things Jackie was an artist. He took his time, skillfully bringing his partner to full arousal. His lips and tongue caressed the now-rigid flesh. Lorenzo had begun to move, squirming and thrusting as his passion mounted.

* * * *

The dark form lifted, changed positions, and Jackie found himself sharing the same intense pleasures. Full warm lips closed over him, and their bodies melted together, moving in unison. They rolled, locked together. Jackie's hands ran over the velvet skin. His senses were assaulted the sweet taste, the slight scent of sweat, and an animal, masculine odor that was natural and fresh. The only sounds were their breathing, harsh and uneven, and the slap of their flesh against flesh.

It broke at last, like a tidal wave sweeping over them, flinging them into the air and then slowly lowering them again to earth as waves receded. They fell apart, breathless, exhausted, totally drained. For the moment Jackie had forgotten completely about Birdie Wing and the missing diamonds.

* * * *

Jackie was never long away from work, however. By morning, having sent his playmate on his way, he once again turned his thoughts to the new case. It sounded at the beginning like a tough assignment, but he

had handled them before. No matter how clever the criminal, he knew that sooner or later some clue would turn up and from there he would be on his way.

The clues this time were slow in coming. He checked with Rich later in the day. The news was disappointing. “Our men have gone through the store with a fine-tooth comb,” Rich informed him. “There's no trace of the diamonds. I'm afraid Upton must have been mistaken about them still being in the store."

"Maybe,” Jackie frowned into the receiver. He was thinking that Upton wasn't very often mistaken about such things. Still, if C.A.M.P.'s agents hadn't been able to find the diamond collection, it certainly seemed that the jewels had been removed from the store. But how?

"I think I'll pay a visit to Ballocks myself,” he decided aloud. “You never know, there might be something that everyone else is overlooking, something so obvious as to be unnoticed."

This time he was dressed in a black silk suit and even wore a large diamond ring of his own. Since the criminals with whom he was dealing this time seemed to have a penchant for diamonds, it couldn't hurt to offer them a little bait—although with such a large haul in their hands they weren't likely to be interested in one ten-carat diamond.

The posh Wilshire Boulevard department store was doing its usual Christmas business. Throngs of shoppers crowded the aisles in every department, and clerks, some of them obvious beginners, were hard pressed to keep up with the rush. Jackie rambled idly through the store, stopping to browse in various departments.

Upton had not exaggerated the thoroughness of the store's security system. In addition to the guards at the doors and posted throughout the store Jackie's trained eye picked out numerous “shoppers” who were, he was certain, detectives on the alert for shoplifters. It seemed unlikely that a thief could get out of the store with even one stolen item, let alone an entire jewelry collection, yet this was exactly what must have happened.

Although he spent a full two hours wandering about the store he saw nothing that looked unusual. There were only harried shoppers and busy clerks. On the second floor he paused to watch the store Santa Claus entertaining a long line of kiddies. The bewhiskered man chatted briefly with each child, holding the youngster on his ample

knee. Each child received a gift, gaily wrapped, and candy. Jackie smiled wryly as he thought of the Christmas present Ballocks had unwittingly given Birdie Wing. With luck, though, he could return the gems as a present to the store; that would even things out.

Disappointed at finding no clues, Jackie left the store and headed for the parking lot where his Mercedes was parked. As he climbed into *it* there was a faint sound of chimes, a signal that Rich wanted him. Jackie opened his briefcase. Inside was a complete sending and receiving kit. He answered Rich's call.

"I just heard from Upton," Rich explained, speaking rapidly. "There's been a new development."

"What happened?"

"Marcy's department store just discovered that their jewelry department has been robbed. Every gem in the place has been stolen and replaced with a fake."

Jackie whistled softly. This was getting bigger and bigger. The thieves, it seemed, were not just after the Levinstein collection but every diamond in the city.

"I'll be right over," he replied aloud. "You can give me the details then. While you're at it, I'd suggest someone start checking up on the other stores in the city. I have a feeling some of them are going to be very surprised when they start examining their stock."

"You don't think...?"

"I don't know. But if they didn't stop with Ballocks I don't see why they'd stop with Marcy's. See what you can find out, okay?"

He drove toward The Round Up, making his way swiftly through the afternoon traffic. A short time later he passed through the bar's rest room and entered the secret office of C.A.M.P. As he came into the apartment Rich emerged from the inner room. His face was grim as he greeted his partner.

"It looks like you were right," he said, handing Jackie a sheaf of papers on which he had hastily scribbled notes. "Ballocks and Marcy's weren't the only stores that were hit. We haven't got the complete report yet, but it looks as though every department store in the city that has a jewelry department has been robbed."

Jackie suppressed his astonishment, glancing quickly through the papers. Rich was right, there was scarcely a department store in the city that had escaped the theft. “At this point,” he said, “Birdie Wing owns most of the diamonds in the city."

"The crazy part,” Rich pointed out, “is that the same pattern holds true for all of them. There isn't any indication that the diamonds have been removed from the stores, yet there is not a trace of them inside the stores either."

"Diabolical,” was Jackie's verdict. A bell summoned Rich into the other room. He returned a moment later with reports on two more department stores, both of them identical to the reports they had already received. There was no longer any doubt of the extent of the haul.

"Got any ideas?” Rich asked when Jackie seated himself on the sofa.

"Frankly, no. But there has to be some clue in all this, something that will give us a hint about their methods. Have you noticed anything peculiar about all these reports?"

"No, except the cleverness with which the robberies were apparently carried out."

"Doesn't it strike you as odd that a gang concerned with stealing diamonds should work on department stores when they'd unquestionably do better with jewelry stores, for instance?"

"You're right,” Rich agreed thoughtfully. “The Levinstein collection was an obvious target, but why stores like Marcy's and Grumbles? At best they'd only have a few good stones on hand compared to a large jewelry store where there might be hundreds to steal. But what do you make of it?"

"I don't know. I doubt that it's a coincidence though. There's the possibility that the larger crowds in a department store make their getaway easier, but I have the feeling there's more to it than that. Look, have High Camp check that out for us and see if any of the jewelry stores have been hit. It's possible they haven't discovered the theft yet."

Rich again went into his own office. He came back a short while later to confirm Jackie's suspicions. There were no reports of thefts in jewelry stores. The operations of the jewel thieves had thus far been limited to major department stores.

"It may be a lead," Jackie repeated. He couldn't think, though, what this peculiar piece of information might mean. So far only one thing was clear to him. They were dealing with a very clever scheme, one that had been well planned and executed. He would need all his wits and all the resources of C.A.M.P. to solve this case. And so far he didn't even know where to begin.

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Chapter 3

Jackie spent the following day going from store to store, to all the places that had been robbed. He found himself stymied, however. All of the robberies followed the same pattern. It seemed impossible that the merchandise had been removed from the store, yet thorough searches had revealed no trace of the missing diamonds still inside the stores. It was as though they had disappeared into thin air.

Disappointed, he gave up the search and headed toward his apartment. The signs of Christmas all around him, which usually gave him a happy feeling, failed to penetrate his gloom. Ordinarily this was his favorite time of the year. He liked all the hustle and bustle, the crowds and confusion. Carols could be heard everywhere—coming from stores, from church chimes, whistled by passing pedestrians. He sometimes missed the snow that other parts of the country enjoyed at this time of year, but California at Christmastime had its own particular virtues. The weather was clear, even crisp, dipping into the low temperatures at night and during the day resembling the autumn weather of more eastern regions. The mountains and hills that ringed the city could be seen clearly, the nearer ones dotted with houses, the distant ones even capped with snow.

This time, however, none of this served to cheer him. He disliked cases that seemed unsolvable and that moved slowly. He was happiest when he was in action, and even danger was more of a thrill to him than a fear.

Rich was signaling him as Jackie entered the apartment. Jackie patted Sophie as he hurried to answer the call, and his spirits lifted slightly. Maybe, he was thinking as he lifted the figurine from the dresser, this would be a lead.

As it turned out it was, and a very surprising one. “We just answered our questions about Upton's theory,” Rich informed him crisply.

"We now know that the jewels have been taken from the department stores."

"What's happened?” Jackie asked eagerly, hopeful that the case was finally beginning to move along.

"One of the necklaces from the Levinstein collection just turned up in a pawnshop in Santa Monica."

"Does Upton know?"

"He just called me. He's on his way there now and wanted you to meet him." Rich gave Jackie the address.

"I'm on my way," Jackie told him curtly, ending the conversation. Within minutes he was again in his car, this time speeding across town in the direction of Santa Monica.

As he parked he saw Upton waiting outside the pawnshop for him. Upton hurried over to meet him. They didn't waste time on social amenities; they had worked together too often to have need of such delaying tactics.

"This is the place all right," Upton informed him. "And there's no question about the necklace. It's the Roxanne necklace from the collection. It was pawned yesterday."

"Any lead on the guy who brought it in?"

"We got a description from the owner here. From what he tells me the guy was a midget."

Jackie nodded. "That figures. The Swallows are all little people it certainly confirms our suspicions. What about the pawnshop Owner? Does he seem on the up and up?"

"I'm sure of it, although we're checking him out of course. I thought maybe you'd want to talk to him yourself."

The conversation proved little, however. The owner of the pawnshop, a thin, stooped little man, was obviously frightened and nervous to have become involved in a major crime, but he seemed patently honest.

"I should have guessed something was fishy at the time," he explained. "But the man gave me a story about needing the cash right away and said the necklace was his mother's. I was in a hurry to get out of the store, so I gave him a loan on it. It is a nice piece of jewelry after all. But later I began to get suspicious. First I checked hack through the papers, but there was no news of any thefts so I decided it must be legit. Then this man came in this morning, said he was an investigator. I showed him the necklace and—well, you know the rest.

He called you people."

After getting a complete description of the man who had pawned the necklace, Jackie and Upton left. “I'll have that description checked out through High Camp,” Jackie informed the other agent. “I have no doubt that we'll find he's part of Birdie Wing's gang. But doesn't this whole setup strike you as odd? This man said the guy who brought the necklace in was extremely nervous and in a hurry."

"That's not surprising."

"Maybe. But look at it this way. Birdie Wing wouldn't have gone to so much trouble to stage such a large-scale and clever theft without planning some means of getting rid of the jewels. You can be sure he didn't intend taking chances just walking into any old pawnshop. That's too risky after all the care they've taken beforehand."

"You're right about that,” Upton agreed after a moment's consideration. “And too, with all the loot they've gotten so far, they certainly can't be disposing of it piece by piece this way. It would take them a lifetime."

"That's what I thought, too.” They had reached the Mercedes. “I have an idea, but it's too early yet to do anything more than play around with it. I'm going to check out that description. Get your boys to work on it too. With luck maybe we can find this little man who's unloading diamonds."

"I suppose we could put a check on every pawnshop in the city, hut that would take an army of men."

"I've got one at my disposal,” Jackie answered. “I'll get High Camp busy on that at once, too. If this guy tries to pawn anything else we'll have him nailed."

They parted, and Jackie went straight to the C.A.M.P. office behind The Round Up. In a matter of minutes Rich had given him an identification of the midget who had pawned the necklace.

"Our agents are on their way to every pawnshop in the city,” Rich added. “That guy won't peddle anything else without our knowing about it."

"Fine. Get in touch with me as soon as anything breaks. I'm going to verify the identification with the owner of the first pawnshop."

"What do you make of it?" Rich wanted to know.

Jackie paused. "It's just an idea, but I think this guy has gotten greedy. If this identification is correct, he's part of Birdie's gang and that ties him in with the robberies. But I think he's trying to cash in some of the loot on his own. If so, he's got plenty of troubles. We'd better reach him before Birdie does, for his own sake. If Birdie finds out he's being double-crossed there won't he much left of this guy, not enough anyway to tell us anything."

Jackie returned to the pawnshop in Santa Monica, and the owner positively identified the pictures Jackie showed him. The man who had pawned the necklace was known in C.A.M.P.'s files as Big Mike, and he was a known member of the Swallows. Things were moving along. Now if only Big Mike would try to unload some more of the loot they would be well on their way to tracking down the infamous gang and breaking the case wide open.

Luck was with them—Jackie had started back across town when Rich signaled him. This time it was even better news. "A pawnshop on Main Street downtown. Sounds like the same guy. He just unloaded a brooch that matches the description of one from the collection. Used the same routine came in just as the store was closing, caught the owner in a hurry to get out."

"Is he being followed?"

"Yes. Our man is on his tail now. They're headed in toward Hollywood. I'll give you directions."

Following Rich's running directions, Jackie made his way swiftly into Hollywood. He was well into the heart of the community when Rich gave him the final word. "He's gone to an apartment house on Franklin. Here's the address."

No longer in need of directions, Jackie headed directly for the address Rich had given him. He parked a block away, and before leaving his car, he opened a concealed compartment from which he removed a weapon a tiny, jeweled derringer. Like its owner, the gun looked innocent and harmless, but it could be deadly. Jackie had no license to kill and used the gun only in extreme situations, but instinct told him that this might be one of those times when he would need it.

He approached the apartment building in a casual manner so that he appeared to be nothing more than an innocent stroller. As he came near he caught sight of a shadowy figure entering the building. "Our

man," he thought, although he had seen nothing more than a glimpse of a blue suit. It was good to know that there was someone else on hand just in case of trouble. There was no way of knowing if Big Mike would be alone or in the company of an army of cohorts.

He had started up the steps to the building when another man, this one in a tan suit, emerged from the front door. He started down the steps toward Jackie, and as he did so he did a peculiar thing with his hand, pushing the tip of his thumb between the knuckles of the first two fingers. It was a signal that came from prison life and had sexual meanings, and it was also a signal used by the agents of C.A.M.P. to identify one another.

The man went by Jackie without pause and the words he whispered were just audible to Jackie "Second floor, first apartment on the right." He was gone and on his way down the street before a realization flashed through Jackie's mind. If this was the C.A.M.P. agent, then who was the other man who had darted into the building a moment before? He might, of course, be just one of the tenants, but why had he looked so furtive?

Jackie slipped his hand inside the pocket of his jacket, his fingers closing about the comforting metal of the gun. He entered the dim hallway, pausing just inside. His ears detected the normal sounds coming from the apartments on this floor—people preparing dinner, arguing, a television set blaring from behind one door. Moving quietly but swiftly, Jackie went straight to the stairs that led to the next floor.

The second floor was strangely quiet. There were only four apartments here, and it was possible that the other tenants might not be home. Jackie was well aware that the tenant of the first apartment on the right was home, yet there was nothing but silence from beyond the door. He paused for a moment in the hall.

The silence inside was broken by a sound. It was muffled and hard to identify, but it had sounded like a cry. Jackie lifted a hand and rapped sharply at the door. Inside all was silent again for a moment, then there was a crash of something falling.

Without knocking again Jackie tried the door. It opened, swinging inside on creaking hinges. His hand on the gun, Jackie stepped cautiously inside.

There was nothing particularly unusual about the apartment. It was like hundreds of cheap furnished places throughout the city, the kind

that rent for a few weeks at a time to nondescript transients, the perfect sort of place to use as a hideout.

But Big Mike was no longer worrying about hideouts. In fact, Big Mike would never have to worry about any mortal matters again. He was lying on the floor in a pool of blood. His eyes, wide open, stared grotesquely and unseeingly in Jackie's direction. One hand clutched at his chest, but it had been unable to remove the dagger that was embedded there. Jackie knew before he crossed the room and knelt to check the pulse that Big Mike was dead.

Too late he realized that he was well on his way to joining the midget. He stepped over the body, turned toward the door, and the noise when it came was from behind him. He flung himself sideways in time to save his skull from being cracked open by the length of lead pipe that whistled through the air. He could not completely escape the blow, however; it grazed the side of his head and landed on his shoulder with an explosive thud. The room swam crazily as Jackie reeled and fell, rolling onto his back. Lights flashed and bells clanged, and he could do nothing more than feebly try to raise a hand to ward off the next blow. Through blurred eyes he had a glimpse of his assailant and then the pipe was rushing downward toward him again. Down it came like a deadly lightning bolt, but it missed him, crashing into the floor a fraction of an inch from his head. Seconds later the man who had wielded it crashed to the floor after it.

Jackie shook his head weakly as the pain began to clear. He saw the figure in tan—C.A.M.P.'s agent, framed in the doorway, a revolver in his hand. The silencer on it had dulled the sound of the shot, and in his dazed condition Jackie had even missed the faint “pop” when it was fired.

"That was close,” the newcomer said, stepping quickly into the room and closing the door after him. “Are you all right?"

"A little foggy, but I don't think any great damage was done. What about him?"

The C.A.M.P. agent knelt over the fallen assailant.

"Dead,” he announced. “I didn't have time to take aim of course. All I could do was fire from the hip and hope I got him before he got you."

"Too bad,” Jackie said grimly, staring down at the two bodies. “Two good suspects and now we won't get anything out of either of them. You'd better get out of here. Report this to headquarters and tell them

to have Upton clear it with the local police. I'll hang around here long enough to look things over."

The other agent left at once, carefully closing the door after himself. Jackie worked rapidly, searching both of the dead men with little success. He found the money that Big Mike had just received for the brooch he had pawned but nothing else that appeared to be significant.

He had confirmed his guess though. If the man who had murdered Big Mike was a part of the gang it was obvious that the midget had been double-crossing Birdie. He had paid for it with his life, but the real tragedy was that they were unlikely to have another link to the operation as good as this one could have been. They were back now to searching for some clue.

He left the two men on the floor and turned his attention to the apartment. There was little that offered any possibilities. Everything looked as though it had come with the apartment except some clothes and a few scattered items. In the wastebasket, though, Jackie found further evidence of Birdie Wing's involvement in the matter—two Freecock feathers. They had been tossed into the basket along with some crumpled giftwrapping paper. Examining the feathers, Jackie realized they were tipped with glue. He smoothed out the giftwrap, a metallic lavender-colored affair. Yes, the feathers had been used as decorations with the wrapping paper on some sort of gift that Mike apparently had received.

But of course, he thought, glancing back at the body on the floor, Big Mike could very easily have posed as a child. He couldn't have stood more than four feet tall, and unlike many such little people, he had the sort of baby face that could easily have belonged to a seven- or eight-year-old boy.

* * * *

Rich came anxiously to greet him when Jackie returned to the office. “Heard you had a bit of trouble,” he said, studying the blond agent.

"A piece of pipe,” Jackie answered, rubbing the sore spot on the side of his head. “And not a peace pipe either."

"Better let me take a look at it.” Rich led him into the spacious bathroom of the apartment and seated him on the stool. While he cleaned the slight wound and applied some antiseptic to it Jackie explained about the incident.

"A gang of midgets," Rich mused. "Dressed as children. Do you suppose they'd be more likely to get past security guards and such?"

"I doubt it. Maybe one or two places, but at Ballocks, for example, it wouldn't make any difference, their packages would still have to have tags on them."

"Any ideas what it does mean?"

"None yet, but in the meantime we can inform the stores in question to keep a special eye out for children."

"That's sort of like locking the barn doors after the horse is stolen, isn't it?"

Jackie winced as the antiseptic stung his temple. "I guess you're right. We know now that the jewelry is definitely out of the stores."

They returned to the living room. Rich poured drinks for each of them. "Now what?" he asked, joining Jackie on the sofa.

"Now we try to come up with another angle," was Jackie's answer. "All the pawnshops are closed by this time, so it's not likely anything new will come up before tomorrow."

"Why don't you just spend the night here," Rich suggested. There was a different sound to his voice now. Jackie caught the hopeful note and turned to smile at his companion.

"That's not a bad idea. You never know when something big will come up."

"Something's sure to," Rich agreed. He leaned closer, his strong arms coming around Jackie. Jackie melted into them willingly, returning the fervent kiss.

After a time Rich sighed and stroked the golden hair. "I wish it could always be like this. Just the two of us together this way. I could make you happy, I'm sure of it."

Jackie gave the brawny shoulder a comforting pat. "Don't be a goose," he said, but in a gentle voice. "We've got all this in our blood. We might be able to enjoy ourselves away from it for a few days, maybe a month. But then we'd start missing it all, the excitement and the intrigue, even the danger."

"You don't know how I worry about you every time you start on a case. Someday one of those lead pipes is going to land on target and..."

"And you'd be miserable but you'd go on working just as I would if the situation were reversed. We're bound to C.A.M.P., love, by the strongest chains of all—our own knowledge that it's vitally important, the work we're doing. Neither of us could any more give it up than we could fly to the moon."

Rich smiled ruefully. “I suppose even there, there would be a job for the Man from C.A.M.P."

"Probably. Wherever there's a homosexual and laws that make him live in fear and vulnerability, we'll be needed. The lives and the happiness of millions of people depend on us. We can't shirk that sort of responsibility."

"What about us? What about our lives and our happiness?” There was a trace of bitterness in Rich's voice, but not enough to worry Jackie. This would pass, he knew, this moment of regret. He knew that Rich was as dedicated as he himself was.

"We lay our lives on the line. As for our happiness, we take it where we can get it—at times like this, for instance. We've had many such moments together and we'll always have them. It's all we'd ever have even if we weren't in this work. I'm too honest to ever let you think the two of us could settle down somewhere together. Oh, you know how I feel about you—no one will ever take your place in my affections—but you know what I'm like. All my life I've known countless different men—sometimes dozens in a week with whom I've had relations. I'd be lying if I said I wanted it any other way. You would always be sharing me, a part of me. Sex is a part of my makeup."

"I guess you're right.” Rich sounded better now. His moment of regret had passed.

"Of course,” Jackie added with a suggestive grin, “just because I like variety doesn't mean I can't enjoy coming back to the same kind of meat from time to time. I can still have my favorite cut."

"Sounds inviting. You know this place has one of the largest and most comfortable beds I've ever seen."

"Any bed with you in it would be plenty large enough,” Jackie replied. “And quite comfortable."

Rich kissed him again and then impulsively gathered the smaller figure up in his arms. He carried Jackie effortlessly from the room into the large, dimly lit bedroom. Jackie sighed happily as the huge fingers gently but expertly began to remove his clothes. His trousers went and his shirt. He felt knowing hands on his shorts and then they too were gone and he was naked, the silk of the bedspread cool and sleek against his bare flesh.

He opened his eyes again as Rich stood to undress, watching as his partner's magnificent body came into view. Rich was a giant of a man in every way. Jackie grinned as the already rigid flesh came into view. Many persons who might otherwise have been Rich's lovers had been frightened away by that enormous flesh, but it held no fear for Jackie. He knew it offered nothing but pleasure. His own desires stirred at the sight, and he opened his arms gladly as Rich came to him on the med.

They wasted no time. They had long since learned how precious these moments together could be. At any second duty might summon them from this bed.

But speed did not mean carelessness. They played upon each other's bodies like the sex masters that they were of this pleasure-art. For all his size and strength, Rich displayed infinite tenderness, bringing his partner with him to peaks of arousal.

Rich's strong arms crushed Jackie to him. He rolled, lifting Jackie easily over him. Jackie's slim hips were crushed between powerful legs.

"Think I'll let you do some work for a change," Rich whispered.

Jackie understood, as the legs about him lifted, embracing his waist. He was well aware of the infinite contradictions in people. He knew that the most effeminate male sometimes desired to play the masculine role in such situations, and conversely he knew how often the most masculine-seeming creature might prefer to try the passive role. It was even more flattering to him in this case, because he knew that he was the only person with whom Rich had performed such an act.

He entered slowly and gently, feeling the flesh yield reluctantly to his advance. Rich moaned, but his broad hands drew Jackie onward when the blond would have stopped. Jackie's entire awareness raced downward, concentrating itself at that one point. The warm tightness enveloped him. Beneath him Rich began to gyrate his body, adding to

the sensations.

He reached the limit finally, buried fully within the welcoming body, his coarse hairs digging into Rich's buttocks. He lifted his hips, withdrawing his staff slightly, and then plunged downward again.

"Let yourself go," Rich hissed, wriggling frantically now.

Jackie did just that. His movement quickened, becoming more urgent as his need increased. He ceased thinking of being gentle, but his violent in and out thrusts were met with sounds of pleasure. His hand closed around Rich's throbbing flesh, carrying him along to new heights. They were soaring together. Jackie felt himself lifting, rocketing, and then, in a blinding flash of light, he reached the zenith. He seemed to explode, spewing out the evidence of his passion into Rich's tight hot canal, and his hand was hotly damp with Rich's answering release. He lay for long moments wrapped in Rich's strong arms, his breathing gradually slowing.

They slept finally. Tomorrow, Jackie thought as he drifted off, he would again become an agent for C.A.M.P., on the trail of a ruthless band of thieves and murderers, but for tonight it was good just to lie like this in the arms of a beautiful man, to love and be loved.

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Chapter 4

The lead that Jackie was hoping for came early the next morning and from an unexpected source. He was awakened by the soft ringing of a phone. He was immediately wide awake even as Rich was reaching for the phone. The particular instrument was one reserved for the use of outsiders such as Upton. It could only be an important lead in the case.

"He's here," Rich said into the phone. "Hang on." He handed the receiver over to Jackie, saying, "It's Upton."

"It's like manna from heaven," Upton said quickly, his usually calm voice sounding excited. "We've got another one of the jewels from the Levinstein collection."

"Another pawnshop?" Jackie asked.

"No, it's in the home of one of my wife's friends."

"One of your wife's friends?" Jackie was bewildered.

"In fact," Upton went on, "right now it's in the possession of a most charming young lady."

"She may be one of the gang," was Jackie's immediate response.

"Hardly. This particular young lady happens to be seven years old."

"That's what you think. She's probably a midget made up to look like a child." Upton roared into the phone with laughter. "Don't laugh," Jackie snapped, "I haven't filled you in on the latest developments, but from the looks of things that's how the gang is operating."

"Well, maybe so," Upton said more soberly, "but in this case I don't think we have to fear that. I've known this particular young lady for all of her seven years. I can personally vouch for her age and her innocence."

"Oh." Jackie considered this information. "Then how...?"

"I'd better let you get it for yourself," Upton interrupted. "Why don't you meet me here, all right?"

"I'm on my way," Jackie answered. "Give me the address."

Even as he was repeating the address he had climbed out of the bed and was in the process of donning his trousers. When he was finished with the conversation he headed for the apartment's bathroom. While he was there Rich brought him a cup of steaming coffee. There was no romance this morning; they were already back at work, two dedicated agents.

The address Upton had given Jackie was in one of the city's nicer areas. Jackie had no difficulty finding the house, a comfortable middle-class dwelling, neatly kept. As he came up to the walk Upton opened the door to greet him.

"All right," Jackie said as he stepped inside. "Let's see this infant Diamond Lil."

"In due time, but first I think you should start with Diamond Lil senior." He led the way into a comfortable living room. An attractive brunette rose from the sofa, greeting Jackie pleasantly but a bit anxiously.

"Mrs. Ruth Ellis," Upton introduced them. "Jackie Holmes."

"Would you like some coffee?" Mrs. Ellis asked. Jackie declined, and the three of them seated themselves around the coffee table.

"Correct me if I get any of this wrong," Upton said to Ruth Ellis. Then, to Jackie, "This all started yesterday when Ruth took their daughter Jane, that's the seven-year-old, into town with her on a Christmas shopping trip."

"I usually wait and do all my shopping in one or two trips," she interrupted. "In downtown Los Angeles."

Upton continued, "Among other places they went to Ballocks, and naturally while they were there Jane wanted to visit Santa Claus on the second floor. He's got quite a setup there, in case you don't know —big throne, snow-covered trees, candy cane posts—the works."

"I noticed it the other day," Jackie commented. "He's undoubtedly the most elegant Santa Claus in town."

Upton smiled. "You don't know the half of it. Anyway, Jane went the usual route—sat on the old guy's knee, told him what kind of presents she was hoping for. Then he gave her some candy and a gift.

That's standard procedure there, too. He has two huge cases beside him and every child gets a gift."

"Usually," Ruth said, "it's some trivial little thing—a coloring book or crayons, something like that."

"Only this time it was quite an exception," Upton said. "Ruth didn't let Jane open it there, of course. Too easy to get lost, and besides, as you'll remember, Ballocks has that security thing about tags on packages. So, since this already had a tag it was easier to take it out that way than to stop later and let the guards search it. So it remained wrapped and tagged until they got home."

"That's when I really got surprised." Ruth Ellis stood and went to a small writing desk, opening the drawer. "This is the gift she got," she said, bringing it back and handing it to Jackie.

The first thing Jackie noticed was the wrapping paper—it was lavender. Glued to the paper were some bits of tinsel, a shiny glass ball and two Freecock feathers.

The paper had been hastily wrapped around the package again. Jackie undid it and opened it to reveal the plain white box inside. He removed the lid from the box and lifted away the layer of cotton that had been placed over the contents.

The diamond looked huge against the dark velvet background. It was mounted simply, thin gold fingers held it in place and this was attached to a simple gold chain. A pendant such as this needed little else to make it look spectacular.

Jackie lifted it from the box, staring as the diamond caught the light and sent back a rainbow of shimmering color. Though it was something he did not often mention, he was one of the world's experts on diamonds, having taken top honors at the World Diamond Institute in South Africa.

"It's real, of course," he said. "Five carats and absolutely flawless."

"Yes, and it's from the Levinstein collection," Upton replied.

"At first," Ruth went on, "I thought it must surely be just an imitation. But then after I had thought about it even that didn't make sense. It was hardly an appropriate gift for a child, and even an imitation that good would be rather expensive as a throwaway gift. I didn't know what I should do—call the store, call the police, or what? So I took it

away from Jane—that took some coaxing, let me tell you—and waited for my husband to get home."

"Jack suggested calling the police, of course," Upton continued for her. "But then Ruth thought of my wife and remembered that I had once worked for some kind of police organization. So she called us. I was out until late last night, and since I never dreamed it was anything so important I waited until this morning to come over. As soon as I saw that, of course, I knew we had stumbled onto something."

Jackie turned the chain in his fingers, letting the diamond twirl. "Yes. And I think I'm finally beginning to understand. I'll explain it all to you later, Lou." He turned to the housewife. "We'll have to take this with us, of course."

"Yes, I supposed so, but Jack still thought we should call the police about it."

"I'll have Sergeant Flaherty of the LAPD give you a call later today to let you know it's okay," Upton assured her. "Also, I happen to know where there's an exact replica of this, and I'm sure the owner would be happy to swap with you. That ought to make Jane happy."

"Yes, it certainly would," Ruth agreed. She started to show them to the door. "Oh, I almost forgot," she said suddenly. She went back to the desk again and this time returned with a small slip of paper. "This was in the box also, on top of the cotton and all."

The two men read it together. The message was brief and crudely printed: "Visit Santa at Marcy's Westside, Friday. Deck the halls."

"Don't ask me to explain it," Jackie told her, "but this may be more valuable to us than that pendant."

"What do you make of it?" Upton asked when they were outside.

"It all fits in with what I found yesterday," Jackie answered. He explained briefly about his experiences of the previous day. When they reached his car Upton rode with Jackie, leaving his own car parked on the street.

"So you see, I think we've learned their secret," Jackie said as he headed the Mercedes toward town. "It was so obvious as to be nearly perfect. The diamonds, at least some of them, are still inside the stores, just as you thought. They were hidden in the one place no one thought to search—inside the presents that the store Santas give to the

visiting kiddies."

"Of course," Upton agreed. "We never thought of opening all of those. And every one of the stores involved has just such presents for the children."

"That's why Big Mike had that little boy's suit. No doubt he and the gang, most of them midgets, dressed as children. They took their place in the line and gave the Santa some sort of password and he gave them one of the special packages. I'll bet if we check we'll find all of those stores have packages in a lavender wrap trimmed with Freecock feathers. It's my guess every one of those packages has a stolen diamond in it."

"And Big Mike obviously decided just to keep a few gifts for himself. Only they caught up with him after the first time or two."

"It explains, too, why they only used department stores where there were Santas giving out presents."

"Ruth's little girl must have accidentally stumbled upon the right password and been taken for one of the gang."

"Yes. Their passwords are probably changed regularly, but they'd have to be fairly innocent-sounding phrases or words. I'd bet my virginity that the song title in that note, "Deck the Halls," is the newest password. And the note obviously was to instruct the would-be kiddie where to pick up his next package."

"It all fits," Upton agreed. "Now what do we do, start rounding up the Santas in the department stores?"

"I don't know," Jackie said thoughtfully. "For one thing some of these stores have more than one Santa. First we would have to determine which ones are working with the gang and which ones aren't. Even if we managed that it would still leave Birdie Wing and the rest of his gang on the loose with all the diamonds they've managed to smuggle out of the stores thus far. I think for a start we should make a discreet check at some of the stores for lavender packages to confirm our guesses. After that we'll need a plan of action. This time I intend to catch these ruthless crime-birds in midflight and see that their wings are clipped permanently."

* * * *

They drove to Ballocks department store. Upton led them straight to

the office of the store manager, Waldo Perce, where he introduced Jackie.

"I do hope you've been able to get some sort of lead on the Levinstein collection," Mr. Perce said anxiously. "We can't keep the theft quiet much longer, and if the story breaks it will provoke quite an international incident, you see."

"Unless I miss my guess," Jackie assured him, "we'll have this matter all cleared up in a very short time. In fact, I'm almost convinced that the bulk of the collection is still here in the store."

"Impossible," Perce insisted. "The store has been searched time and again. I can absolutely assure you the jewels aren't here."

"Maybe. There's one thing you can do for me, though. I want some sample packages from your store Santa."

Mr. Perce seemed puzzled. "Why, yes, of course, we can arrange that, but I'm afraid you won't find them very interesting. They're just trivial little things for the kiddies. None of them are worth more than a few cents."

"Just the same, I'd like to have one or two brought here, but discreetly. I want one of your most trusted employees to get them for me, and I want no one else to know they've been taken. Can you arrange that?"

"Of course, I'll send my own secretary for them." He pressed the buzzer on his desk and a minute later an attractive redheaded youth appeared in the doorway. "Jim," Perce instructed him, "these gentlemen want you to bring them a couple of the packages from our Santa bag. It's most important that no one know you've taken them. Can you manage that?"

"Sure," Jim replied with a confident grin. "I've always had a yen to try shoplifting."

"One more thing," Jackie added as the redhead started for the door. "The packages we want will be wrapped in lavender paper and trimmed with white, pearly-looking feathers."

Jim seemed puzzled, but he nodded his understanding and left. The minutes dragged by as they waited, though in fact it was a scant quarter of an hour later when he returned. He opened his jacket to reveal the small lavender packages hidden inside his jacket.

"Easy," he declared, setting the gifts atop the desk. "Not a soul knew I got them."

"Tell me," Jackie asked, "did you have any trouble finding packages of this description?"

"None at all. There were dozens like this scattered through the bag."

Jackie exchanged glances with Upton. The packages on the desk were identical to the one that Jane Ellis had received, and the paper and trim were the same as Jackie had found in Big Mike's apartment.

When the secretary had gone Jackie took the first of the packages from the desk. He opened it quickly, letting the paper and trim fall to the floor. Then, with Upton and Perce craning to see, he set the white box on the desk top and lifted the lid dramatically. There was the expected layer of cotton and beneath that, just as Jackie had suspected, the brilliant glitter of diamonds, this time a ring.

"Good heavens," Perce exclaimed, "it is part of the collection."

"So is the other package, I'll wager," Jackie informed him. "And so are all those other packages your secretary saw that were wrapped like this."

Perce ripped open the second box with shaking fingers. Sure enough, it was another of the missing diamonds, a brooch. "This is incredible," he gasped. "Why, we have only to bring all those packages here and we'll have the collection back."

Jackie shook his head. "Unfortunately, you would only have part of it. I don't even know yet how big a part. The rest, the pieces that have already been taken from the store, would be lost to you. What's more, we would lose our chance of ever nailing the thieves."

"But what do you propose to do then?"

"Let them continue as they have been," Jackie replied.

"Why, they will soon get away with the entire collection."

"Not if I can help it," Jackie said. "Because now that we know how they're playing this game I've got a few ideas of my own. Give me a little time and I'll give you back your diamonds, every last one of them."

It was a gamble on Jackie's part, and he was well aware of the seriousness of the consequences. If he succeeded he would have managed to foil one of the largest robberies in history. If he failed ... he didn't even let himself consider that possibility.

Despite his request for time, however, he knew that time was not on his side. He had only three days left until Christmas. By that time the gang unquestionably intended to have all the diamonds out of the stores, since their scheme would be useless once Christmas was past. He would have to solve this case within those three days—and every hour that passed meant that more and more of the diamonds were passing into the hands of the gang outside.

Even while he had argued with Perce for more time, however, he had been forming a plan. Somehow he had to make contact with some of the gang, and already he thought he knew how he could do that. It was a risky plan, but he had taken chances before. That was just part of his work.

Perce finally agreed, with some reluctance, to cooperate with Jackie. Having gained this concession, Jackie left Upton and the store manager and headed straight for the C.A.M.P. office, where he quickly informed Rich of the developments.

"It sounds as though you've already got a plan brewing," Rich commented.

"Of course. I intend to work my way into the gang."

"But how?"

"Simple." Jackie grinned. "I'm going to go to work for them, as one of their delivery people."

"You! But that would mean..." Rich stared in disbelief.

Jackie nodded his head. "That's right. After all, I am rather short and today's children are often tall. I'm going to become one of their little people. Don't you remember that costume I wore to the annual C.A.M.P. masquerade?"

"You mean the one where you went as Shelley Tipple, the child actress?"

"Exactly—the one with the sausage-curl wig. It was an exact copy of the costume she wore in the movie The Good Sucker. With the right

makeup and all I can pass for a little girl, or at least a midget posing as a little girl, which is what counts. Don't forget I have that note with instructions for the next contact. All I have to do is go to Marcy's Westside store Friday and use the password."

"Friday—that's tomorrow. I don't know, it sounds dangerous. Suppose they realize you're not really a girl?"

"You're joking. After all these years no one's discovered that yet. It would be different if I were going to pose as a lady."

* * * *

At first Rich did not recognize the creature who entered the apartment the next day. It was exactly as though the legendary child actress had stepped from the movie screen of several years ago. Her blonde hair hung in curls over her shoulders. She wore a jaunty sailor cap and a frilly skirt and there were large bows on her patent leather shoes. In one hand she carried a small purse and in the other a huge lollipop.

While Rich stared in amazement the little moppet did a brief soft shoe and sang, in a high lisping voice, a few bars of the hit tune from her baseball movie: “Show me the balls and I'll take a crack at them."

"It's unbelievable,” Rich declared. “You look like a sweet little girl. You look, in fact, exactly like Shelley Tipple a few years ago."

"You say the nicest things,” Jackie answered in his normal voice. “But I'm glad you like it. After all, I want my daddy to be happy with me."

"Your daddy?"

"Of course. I've always said I wanted you for a daddy. A little girl like me can't just go running around town by herself. Suppose I got molested?"

"Perish the thought,” Rich said with a laugh. “Well, I suppose you're right. I'll have to clear it with High Camp and arrange to have the office monitored, but frankly I don't think I'd want to miss this performance for anything."

A short time later they were making their way through the crowds at Marcy's Westside department store. Jackie held tightly to Rich's hand, tickling the palm occasionally, to Rich's discomfort.

The Santa Claus department was on the fourth floor. Already, though

it was early, there was a long line of children waiting with their mothers and a few fathers.

"Oh, Daddy," Jackie squealed, jumping up and down on one foot, "There he is. It's Santa Claus."

Rich smothered his embarrassment and took his place in line with his "daughter." The line moved forward slowly. The children fidgeted. Some of them cried or yelled. The little boy in front of them stared at Jackie for a while and then stuck out his tongue. Jackie stuck out his as well.

"Now be nice, dear," Rich warned him, tugging his hand as the mother turned around to glower at them.

"Oh, sure," Jackie agreed reluctantly. He shoved his lollipop in the little boy's face. "Here, wanna suck my thing?"

The mother nervously yanked her son in front of her. "Charming little girl," she said without enthusiasm. "But isn't she a bit big for this sort of thing?"

"Jackie Sue?" Rich asked. "She's just tall for her age. She's only eight."

"Heavens, what on earth do you give her to eat?"

"Oh, she eats a variety of things," Rich said. "She can't seem to get enough of the things she likes."

"Mostly meat," Jackie Sue added. "I love tons of meat, fresh, hot meat, especially big fat sausages. And loads of cream."

"And cheese," Rich suggested.

"Ugh." Jackie Sue made a face.

"Sounds like a heavy diet for a young girl," the woman said doubtfully.

"It puts hair on my chest," Jackie Sue answered to the woman's dismay.

"She's got quite a sense of humor," Rich said, giving Jackie's hand an anxious tug.

"So I see. Well, as big as she is I'll bet the boys don't tease her much."

"Oh, I hate a boy who's a tease," Jackie Sue said. "I like boys who are soft on me. But if a boy gets hard, why then I sit on him. I've sat on lots of boys. They always come after a while. To their senses, I mean."

The line moved forward again. The woman seemed to have given up the conversation. After another long wait it was time for her son to chat with Santa and Rich and Jackie were next in line. Jackie took advantage of the opportunity to study the Santa. He looked like an ordinary department store Santa Claus and not at all like a jewel thief. But then, Jackie reminded himself, just at the moment he didn't look like a secret agent either. You just couldn't go by appearances in this business.

At last it was Jackie's turn. Ignoring the surprise on Santa's face, he skipped up the length of the carpet and proceeded to climb up on one big knee.

"My," Santa said, obviously finding this visitor heavier than most, "you're a big girl, aren't you?"

"The better to trim your tree," Jackie quipped in his little girl voice. He had decided to make his play right away. Without waiting for further conversation he broke into song—"Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly..." He paused at this point.

Santa gave him another surprised look. Then, after a pause, he laughed and finished the line—"Fa la la la la, la la la la."

There was an awkward pause. Uncertain just what the procedure was with the gang Jackie decided to continue. "'Tis the season to be jolly..." This time Santa didn't laugh but with a shrug added the fa la las.

"Don we now our gay apparel," sang Jackie.

"Are you planning on becoming a singer?" Santa asked, tiring of the singing game.

"Have you heard enough?" Jackie asked.

"Oh, quite," Santa assured him, getting a bit impatient. "After all you didn't come here to serenade Santa, did you?"

"Oh, no, not at all. I came to get some goodies."

"I see. Any special goodies?" Santa had regained his usual air of good

cheer.

"Very special ones," Jackie replied in a lower voice. "Something with feathers."

"I see." Santa was momentarily at a loss. "Well, I don't think we have any canaries on hand, but maybe by Christmas Eve."

"Why don't you just slip it to me?" Jackie whispered, giving the bewhiskered man a wink.

"I beg your pardon!"

"You know, what you've been saving up for me. Give it to me. Okay, pops?"

Santa's face reddened. He cleared his throat. "My, you're a precocious thing, aren't you? Could it be possible that you've heard rumors about me...."

"Not just rumors," Jackie assured him. They were talking now in lowered voices, although Santa kept glancing nervously at the waiting line of parents and children. "I know about your special things for little girls—the right little girls. I'm here to get mine. And I assure you I'm the right little girl for you."

"Well, yes, of course, I can see that," Santa said with a nervous giggle. "But you know I couldn't do anything like that here, with all these people watching."

"Then I'll meet you somewhere. How about in the stockroom?"

"The stockroom? You want—you want to meet me?"

"Sure, and any way you want to spell it, too." Jackie winked again.

"Oh, I see." Santa seemed increasingly nervous. What did you say your name was—Lolita?"

"Jackie Sue. Look, I haven't got much time, I'm meeting another old guy later. Can we make this a quickie?"

"What about your daddy?"

"Him? Oh, don't worry, he's in on it. He always goes along when I'm after this sort of thing just to make it safer. No questions asked that way. Don't you get it?"

"Yes. I must say it's a unique arrangement. Well, I take a break in fifteen minutes. If you're sure, why don't you sort of hang around and follow me down to the stockroom. We'll work something out, okay?"

"Now you're talking." Jackie raised his voice again. "Oh, Santa, you're such a card." He gave Santa a smack on the cheek with his lollipop. "I can't wait to see what you've got for me."

"Well, it's nothing spectacular," Santa admitted ruefully. "I mean, don't expect too much."

"It may be small," Jackie whispered, "but I'll bet it's priceless."

Santa blushed again. "I've been told it's very nice," he admitted.

The other children were getting impatient. Santa reached into the large box beside him and brought out a small present not, Jackie noticed, a lavender one. "Here's a little something from Santa," he said loudly. In a lower voice he added, "I'll have something special for you down in the stockroom."

"Good-bye, Santa," Jackie chirped, climbing down off the knee. With a final wink he skipped over to where Rich was waiting and grabbed Rich's hand. "Okay, Daddy, let's go," he said, tugging his partner away.

"How did you do?" Rich asked as soon as they had moved away from the crowd.

"Fine," Jackie assured him. "Although personally I think this guy's goofy. But I'm to follow him to the stockroom in a few minutes. He'll give me the real stuff there. Apparently they aren't taking any chances. They may be getting nervous." He related his conversation with Santa.

"I don't know, it sounds strange to me," Rich said. "Maybe they have gotten wise."

"I don't see how. Anyway this guy is just so much blubber. I can handle him all right."

"Maybe so. Still, while you're waiting for him to take his break I think I'll check it out with High Camp just to see if there's any new developments. You never know."

"Okay. I'll wait here where I can watch Santa, but make it fast."

Rich hurried away through the crowds in search of a phone. Jackie turned back to discover that Santa was just closing up his shop to take a break—the sign said to feed his reindeer. As the red-suited man crossed the store he gave Jackie a wink and a quick nod of his head. There was nothing Jackie could do but follow him and hope that Rich would not be gone long.

Santa disappeared through a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. Jackie paused, glanced around to confirm that he wasn't noticed, and slipped through the door. Ahead of him Santa paused beside an aisle that led through the stock bins. When he saw Jackie he again jerked his head and disappeared down the aisle. Jackie followed him. As he came to the end of the bin he found Santa waiting for him, safely away from any observers.

"Well, have you got it with you?" Jackie asked in a low voice.

Santa looked startled. "I could hardly leave it behind," he said.

"Where is it?"

"Where...? Why, in my pants, of course."

"Oh." Jackie was increasingly uneasy. This man seemed to he stalling for some reason. Maybe this was a trap. Or maybe Santa still wasn't convinced that he was a member of the gang.

"Well, let me have it," Jackie said. "I hope that it's Lavender, with feathers."

At this Santa truly was startled. His eyes went wide. "What the hell do you want with feathers?"

"Maybe I like to be tickled," Jackie answered, giving him a coy smile.

"Oh, I see," Santa said nodding. A lecherous expression came over his face. "Just playful, huh? Well, come here you little minx, Santa will tickle you plenty."

He made a grab for Jackie, flinging his arms around the ruffled shoulders. "Hey," Jackie gave a muffled squeal. "Take it easy. I have to see your package first."

"Heavens, you are certainly forward for a little girl, but if you insist..." Relinquishing his hold on Jackie, Santa began to unbuckle his wide belt. "Did anyone ever tell you that you look just like..."

It was at that moment that Rich appeared, rushing down the aisle. “What's the big idea?” He demanded in an angry voice.

"Oh...!” Santa stopped with his pants hanging open and his stiff rod jutting out—he had certainly been right, Jackie thought, when he had said not to expect too much. He gave Jackie a look of consternation. “I thought you said Daddy knew all about this."

"But Daddy,” Jackie tried to say, puzzled by Rich's show of temper. “This nice man..."

"Never mind,” Rich bellowed. His loud voice had produced instant results. Already other employees had stepped into the aisle to stare at the trio. “How dare you, you monster—molesting my innocent little daughter. I ought to thrash you."

"But—but...” Santa sputtered, looking about in horror at the growing crowd of angry and shocked onlookers.

"Daddy, darling,” Jackie tried again.

"Come on, dear.” Rich grabbed his hand and fairly dragged Jackie away. “We'll talk to the manager about this."

There was nothing that Jackie could do but trail along with his partner while he fumed silently. They burst through the employee's door and for a moment there was no one near them.

"Damn it,” he snapped. “He was about to give it to me."

"I don't doubt it,” Rich agreed with an amused expression, “but it wasn't the kind of gem you were expecting. I just found out that this guy isn't their regular Santa."

"What?"

"Exactly. The regular guy didn't show up today. This man is just a sales clerk they rushed into duty. So he couldn't have been part of the gang."

"Then he was just a..."

"A dirty old man,” Rich concluded. “The gang must have realized that note had fallen into the wrong hands and rather than take a risk they abandoned this place. That guy was just a lecherous old goat who thought he had found himself a nymphet."

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Chapter 5

It had been, to say the least, a poor start for their plans. Before leaving the store they lodged a complaint with the manager regarding the lecherous Santa. “Although,” as Rich stated, “after the scene I caused I doubt that he'll be molesting any other little girls."

"Now what?” Rich asked when they were back in the car.

"Well, even if they pulled out of this store and gave up the loot there I doubt that they'll call off the whole deal. They have to still be operating in the other stores, and the only thing for us to do is try to find out which one."

"You mean we've got to go through all this again?” Rich was dismayed.

"And again and again until we find a Santa who is a part of their setup. We've got to make contact and it has to be fast. Don't forget, by the day after tomorrow all of the diamonds will be out of the stores and they will be making their getaway. In this case it's now or never."

They began to make the rounds of the Santa Clauses in the various department stores which had been involved in the robberies. After the first store the fun of the situation began to wear off and it became a tedious task. Nonetheless, they had no choice but to persevere.

Their next stop was another branch of the Marcy chain. At this one Jackie was more cautious. He used the password, but it produced only a blank stare and the gift that he was given was in a plain red package. It proved, upon examination, to be nothing but a whistle.

From there they went to Ballocks. This was one store Jackie was certain the thieves would not abandon unless they were absolutely forced to, not with a considerable portion of the Levinstein collection still to be removed from inside the store.

Luck was with him this time. When he used the code phrase, “Deck the Halls,” it produced immediate results. Santa leaned closer on the pretext of tweaking Jackie's powdered ear.

"Are you one of us?” He asked.

"Yes," Jackie whispered in return. "I was sent here from Marcy's. We're speeding up the operation. You're to give me instructions on delivering this stuff." He was taking a chance that this Santa would know about the delivery, but time was growing shorter and shorter.

"I see. You'll have to see Doc about the delivery, though."

"Where will I find him?"

If the Santa found this question suspicious he gave no sign of it. "Hardware department," was the immediate reply.

"Well, I'm glad to know you've been a good little girl," he said in a natural voice. "And here's a present from Santa."

With that he presented Jackie with a package wrapped in a metallic lavender paper and trimmed with Freecock feathers. Jackie's pulse quickened. He was on the trail at last. His eyes beamed with excitement as he tripped away from Santa to rejoin his "Daddy."

"Bingo," he said as they walked away from that department. He explained tersely about the contact. "I'm going to see this Doc for instructions. You go on to the car and notify C.A.M.P. of our success. Wait for me there."

"What if there's trouble?" Rich asked.

"Don't worry. I'm just getting instructions from this guy. The danger will be wherever he sends me, and if you want to go along with me on that I won't have any objections."

They parted, Rich headed for the car, Jackie making his way to the hardware department. He was careful to maintain his guise of an innocent little girl, although certainly Doc would know better.

There were several clerks working in the hardware department. Most of them, however, were obviously part-time help, mostly young students. There was a woman and a mature gentleman. Jackie guessed that the latter was the man he wanted. He walked idly through the department, waiting for an opportunity to catch the man alone. At last he saw his chance and walked up to him. He had kept the lavender package with him and was careful now to let it be seen.

"You're Doc?" he asked, his back turned to the other people in the department. The man gave him a quick glance, noted the package, and nodded.

"I'm to see you about delivery instructions," Jackie said quickly.

"I see. We can't talk here. I'll lead the way to the back room."

It was similar to what had happened at Marcy's, but this time Jackie was sure there was no misunderstanding. He watched as Doc, a rather burly type, puttered about for a moment and then unobtrusively made his way toward the rear. Jackie gave him a moment s lead, then followed.

The stockroom was dimly lit. It appeared empty as well. There was no sign of Doc. Maybe something has gone wrong, Jackie thought anxiously. He glanced at the large Mickey Mouse watch on his wrist. It was nearly closing time. Perhaps Doc had run into someone and had had to change his plans. What now wait for him to show up or go outside to meet Rich?

He decided to risk another minute or so looking for Doc. He walked cautiously forward along the aisle, hoping he would not be seen by some other clerk and asked to leave the area. He sniffed the air. There was a strange scent in the room, one that for a moment he couldn't quite identify, although it smelled vaguely familiar.

He realized all at once what it was. Even before he could turn an arm came around him and a wet cloth was pressed to his face. The chloroform seared his nostrils with its pungent odor and its sweet taste filled his mouth. He struggled against the arm, hut the First deep breath had immediately weakened him. He staggered, but the arm held him fast, and his attempt to cry out only filled his lungs further with the anesthetic. The room tilted and swerved and his legs seemed to melt beneath him. His eyes rolled closed, and with terrifying swiftness the darkness closed over him.

He was out only a brief time; the first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was a watch—not his own but one that was attached to a thick, hairy wrist. His own hands were behind him, and even before he tugged at them he knew they were tied. A gag covered his mouth and his ankles, too, were bound.

He opened his eyes and looked into the cruel face of the man called Doc. Doc's face twisted into a vicious leer. "Well, the Sleeping Beauty awakes," he sneered. "Thought you'd pulled a fast one, didn't you?"

Jackie tried to reply, but the gag made a grunt of his words.

"You stupid bitch, didn't you hear what happened to Big Mike for

trying to pull a fast one?"

Jackie breathed a mental sigh of relief. They had not realized that he was an agent then. They thought he was trying to double-cross the gang and get some of the jewels for himself. At least that meant they wouldn't be scared into hiding, but it didn't make his situation any less perilous. He knew only too well what they had done to Big Mike.

As if reading his mind Doc said, “You should have thought of that sooner. Now I'll have to slit your throat.” He paused, his eyes going up and down Jackie's helpless body. “But first, I'm going to find out just how much of a little girl you are."

There was no mistaking his intentions. Jackie's fear mounted. It wasn't just a matter of being raped, horrible as that might be. If Doc attempted to molest him he would discover that Jackie wasn't a girl at all. From there it would take no great intelligence to realize that Jackie was more than just a double-crossing member of the gang.

Leering wickedly, Doc reached out for Jackie's leg. At that moment a voice called from above: “Doc, are you down there?"

Doc looked in the direction of the voice, alarmed. Jackie had a chance to see around him. They were apparently in the basement, below the stockroom. “Yeah,” Doc yelled back reluctantly. “I'll be right up."

"I need your approval on a check,” the clerk called from above.

"Okay, okay. I said I'd be there in a minute."

"Can't you come now? Didn't you hear the bell? The store's closing and I can't finish this sale till you approve it."

Doc swore under his breath. He looked down at Jackie and then over his shoulder again in the direction of the voice.

"Look, I'll bring the check down there,” the impatient sales clerk called.

"No, I'm coming right now,” Doc called back quickly. He turned back to Jackie. “This should keep you quiet for a while,” he said in a whisper. Before Jackie could try to duck a solid fist crashed into his jaw. He descended again into blackness.

The blackness remained this time. He lay with consciousness returning, blinking his eyes. Finally he realized that the room was

dark. He was still bound and gagged but he was alive. His mind quickly considered what must have happened. In the rush of store closing Doc seemingly had been unable to return here and finish the job he had started. Perhaps he just hadn't been able to get away from his fellow employees without giving his hand away. Instead he had chosen to risk leaving Jackie here for the night.

With his hands behind him, Jackie had no way of knowing how late it was. He thought of Rich. Would Rich realize that he was still inside the store or would he think that time had been pressing and Jackie had gone on his own to deliver the diamonds? By morning, of course, Rich would realize the truth, but by morning, or maybe sooner, Doc would be here. Certainly he would make a point of arriving early for work and his first act would be to come down to the basement and tend to unfinished business.

First things first, Jackie told himself. Whatever time of night it was he had to get himself out of these ropes. Fortunately, as a boy he had been an Eagle Scout and trained always to be prepared for most eventualities.

He rolled on his side, giving him maximum freedom to move his feet. Ordinarily he would have needed to get his hands to his shoe, to the hidden catch there, but with patience and luck he might be able to work it anyway. The catch was on the inside of the heel of the right shoe. Striking the heel on the floor would accomplish nothing, but if he could somehow manage to strike that edge...

There were boxes and crates all around him. All he had to do was get his feet up to the edge of one and strike the inner edge of the heel against a corner.

Like a snake he wriggled his way toward one of the large crates. It seemed hours, although in fact it was only minutes, before his feet struck the wooden surface. After that he had to work his way around to the corner. The sweat dripped from his forehead and the hard floor scraped his bare skin but at last he was able to hook the heel of his shoe on the crate's corner. He kicked clumsily. The first try was unsuccessful, but on the second he heard the welcome click. A small, razor-sharp blade shot out from the tip of his shoe.

Once again he had to change his position. This time it was necessary to bend himself backward, bringing his feet up to his bound hands. It was a difficult feat and he was grateful not for the first time for the years he had spent perfecting his acrobatic abilities. His muscles

strained as he arched his back.

At last his fingers touched the slick surface of a shoe. He tugged to get his feet up behind his hands. Finally they were in position. He winced as the blade accidentally slashed the back of his hand. Carefully he worked the blade in between his wrists, slicing his hands back and forth. The ropes weakened and gave. In seconds he had removed the last of his bonds and was free.

He paused for a moment at the bottom of the steps leading upward. He could merely break out of the store, which would bring the police. Unfortunately he was still in his disguise as Jackie Sue, the precocious little girl. That might make for some difficult explaining. The easiest thing, he decided, would be to phone Rich and let C.A.M.P. arrange to get him out. He glanced around. There was no phone in sight down here. Hoping the door at the top would be unlocked, he hurried up the steps.

The door opened at his touch. He slipped out into the darkened stockroom. There was undoubtedly a phone here, but without lights he would never find it. He decided to go into the store itself where the light from the street would make it easier to find his way around. There were phones there in each department.

He entered the hardware department and ahead of him was the sales counter and a telephone. He had nearly reached it when he heard a sound. At first it was little more than a whisper. After a few seconds he recognized the sound of padded feet. He remembered in a flash that Ballock's used trained dogs to guard their stores at night, vicious Doberman pinschers that roamed the store in search of any intruders.

The noises came swiftly nearer and now he heard a sniffing, somewhere within a few feet of him. Had it been a human guard it would have been a different situation, but he did not quite like trying to persuade a Doberman that he was not a thief. With lightning swiftness Jackie lifted his ruffled skirt and dashed for a counter. In the same instant there was a snarl and a roar and a streak of brown dashed into the aisle in front of him. The dog's ears were laid back, the eyes flashing fire. Twin rows of vicious teeth gleamed in the semi-light as the dog hurtled toward Jackie.

There was no hope of reaching the phone in time to call anyone or even of making an escape through the door to the stockroom. With one powerful leap Jackie bounded onto the sales counter. He poised for a second. Things were getting rapidly worse. A second dog joined

the first, both of them racing toward the counter where he had sought refuge.

It was useless to think that he would be safe where he was. At best he could only hope to dodge and duck until he found some avenue of escape.

One of the dogs shot into the air. Even as the dog crashed onto the counter Jackie whirled and leaped across the aisle to another counter. Merchandise clattered and crashed as the dog, moving too fast to come to a halt, slid into the next aisle.

Jackie ran, leaping between displays of merchandise. He did not need to look back to know that the dog was in pursuit. Even as super fit as he was, Jackie had no illusions about outrunning a Doberman. Only his wits could save him from those sharp teeth.

He kicked at a container of nails, spilling them in his wake. It delayed the dog for only a fraction of a second. Jackie had hoped to reach the stockroom door, but as he glanced down he knew it was futile. The second dog was racing along the aisle beneath him, roaring and snapping. The beast would head him off easily and block access to the door, and the first dog was within inches of Jackie's flying feet.

With a silent prayer for sound construction, Jackie sprang into the air. He reached the next counter, which sagged under his weight. With scarcely a pause he jumped again. This time his fingers grasped the light fixture that hung suspended from the ceiling. It sagged and creaked ominously as his weight tugged at the screws that held it. Jackie swung his feet upward as a flash of brown streaked by.

His arms felt as though they had been jerked from their sockets, but he maintained his tenuous grip and the fixture held. Both dogs were beneath him now, growling and jumping into the air, trying to catch his feet. Jackie glanced around frantically. His heart sank. He had gone from the frying pan into the fire. The dogs could not quite manage to reach him, it was true, but he could hardly hang here all night—and there was no place left for him to escape to.

"Mother of Pearl," he thought anxiously. "Sooner or later my fingers are going to give out, and when they do those dogs will have my throat."

He thought about the human guards that surely must be somewhere about the store. If he yelled they would probably come running, but they might shoot first when they saw a figure swinging through the air

and give him no time for explanations. All in all it was not a very pleasant situation.

He was facing a wall. Heavy draperies hung from the ceiling. If he could somehow reach them and pull them from their rods he could throw them over the dogs, maybe even make a net of them. At the least the dogs might be entangled long enough to give him a chance to reach safety.

He held on with one hand, swinging toward the draperies. The distance was too great. He would have to use the entire length of his body; then if he could somehow hold on to them with his feet and pull them free. He strained the muscles of his arm, swinging his body with gradually increasing momentum. His feet brushed the heavy fabric. Another swing and he could cross his ankles about the draperies, but they slipped free as he swung back. He tried again, but again he was unable to hold the fabric securely enough to pull it free.

The light fixture groaned. Then, horribly, it dropped only an inch but enough to give him warning it would not hold up much longer under such a strain. Jackie glanced upward at the screws bolts which were slowly yielding. A few more seconds and he would they crash to the floor.

The fixture sagged again and one screw dropped to the floor. With all of his strength Jackie threw himself into the air. His fingers clutched at the draperies. For an instant they held. Then with a crashand the sound of ripping cloth he and the draperies fell to the floor. He was caught up in the heavy cloth just as he had planned the dogs would be. He tried to scramble free, but the fabric was twisted around his feet and over his head. Even as he fought against the weight the dogs were upon him. A flash of pain erupted as sharp teeth tore into one exposed arm.

As suddenly as the dogs had pounced on him they were gone. Jackie struggled against the clinging draperies and managed to get his head uncovered. He heard voices and the sound of running footsteps and in a moment an uniformed guard ran up calling off the dogs. Behind him were Rich, Upton, and Perce, the store manager.

"That was close," Jackie greeted them, taking the hand Rich offered. "I felt like a gift wrapped dinner for that pair."

"Sorry I couldn't get here sooner," Rich apologized. "At first I didn't believe you were still in the store and I didn't have a homing device to

pick up a signal from you. I had to go back to the office. Once I found out you were still here I got hold of Upton and had him call Mister Perce to meet us here."

"You're sure this is the same person I met in my office?" Perce said doubtfully. To his amazement Jackie deftly removed his wig. "Well, I'll be," Perce declared. "I certainly would never have recognized you."

"I don't think our enemies did either," Jackie said. "But, unfortunately, I walked into a trap. It was just lucky the store was closing, although I must say I wasn't too happy to find myself in here with those creatures." He indicated the Dobermans, now held on a leash by the guard.

"No, they are vicious," the guard agreed.

"What about the man you were to contact?" Rich asked.

"He left for the night apparently. That gives us a new problem. If they know I got away they'll probably decide to forego the rest of the jewels and skip out with what they've got. We've got to let them think otherwise."

"I can maintain my silence," Perce offered, "and I'm sure our guard here will follow orders on that score." The guard nodded.

"Fine," Jackie said. "Leave the rest up to me. But don't be surprised tomorrow when you read of the mysterious death of a little girl."

"But won't that be had for business?"

"Not necessarily. She was in the store at night, remember, and it will seem as though she must have been a thief. That ought to discourage any would-be store breakers."

In the car Jackie used his radio to put through a call to an old friend, Vernon Boswell. Boswell was owner of one of the city's leading newspapers as well as a long time personal friend of Jackie's. Boswell knew of C.A.M.P. and Jackie's association with them. On many occasions he had proved of invaluable assistance in solving a case. The number that Jackie dialed was not the one that Boswell's associates would have used. Jackie alone knew this number and its use was a signal to the newspaperman that his aid was urgently needed.

"What's up, Jackie?" Boswell answered the phone.

"I need a story planted." Jackie explained quickly, wasting no time on the niceties of conversation. They were both men of action who had long ago agreed that such conventions were not essential in their relationship.

"I'll see that it's taken care of," Boswell assured him when he had heard Jackie's story. "Just see to it that I get an exclusive story out of it, okay?"

"You will. In fact, I'll make you a Christmas present of it," Jackie promised.

* * * *

The morning paper carried the story just as Jackie had outlined it. According to the account the body of an unidentified woman, made up to appear like a youngster, had been found in the store. Indications were that she had been in the act of robbing the store and had fallen prey to the guard dogs.

Jackie realized that the gang would wonder how "she" had gotten untied, a fact he deliberately had left unmentioned in the story. But he was sure they would come to their own conclusions regarding that mystery and did not think it would be enough to frighten them away from their operations. If he was going to break this case he wanted to keep them going until he had set his trap.

Despite this ruse, however, his situation was far from comforting. He had only two days left before Christmas. Unless he could somehow solve the case within those two days the gang would slip through his fingers and make good on their haul. His time was rapidly running out.

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Chapter 6

"Where do we go from here?" Rich asked when he had finished reading the fake story in the morning paper. "We still haven't found Birdie Wing's headquarters or where the diamonds are hidden."

"No," Jackie admitted, helping himself to another cup of coffee. "But we know for certain that the Santa at Ballocks is part of the gang. Apparently he knows enough of the operation to know that my appearance yesterday wasn't in order. I think we'll continue to work on him."

"We could have Upton pick him up and question him," Rich suggested.

"No, he might not talk. I think first we'd better learn a little more about him. Let's check with Perce and find out what information they have on the man."

The store's personnel file had little on the Santa. His name was Barry Shaw and he had been hired at the beginning of the season when the regular man had failed to report for work. His application included a home address and some previous work experience. The work experience soon proved to be fictitious.

"There's one thing I don't think he would lie about, though," Jackie said. "They couldn't be certain he would just walk in and be put to work even if the store needed someone desperately. He would have to have given a legitimate address or at least a phone number. Let's check those out."

The address proved to be in a neighborhood that had once been an area of plush residences but had since become mostly commercial. It wasn't difficult to find the place, as it occupied most of one block.

"Happy Hours Rest Home," Rich read the sign over the gate. "Do you think this is really legit?"

"I wonder," Jackie mused. "Many store Santas really are older men, retired, who pick up some extra money at the seasonal job. I've got a hunch. Let's head back to the office."

Back at the office of C.A.M.P. Jackie began to call the other

department stores involved in the robberies. As he placed the calls his suspicions grew. “Just as I thought,” he said after the fourth call, “all of those Santas have the same address on their applications. They are all residents of the Happy Hours Rest Home."

"That certainly indicates something,” Rich agreed.

"Yes. I could be mistaken, but it begins to look as though that rest home may be the center of operations for this gang. At least it's an important link to the chain."

"Then let's check it out. I'd be very interested in seeing what a search of that place turned up."

"Exactly. But we've got to be careful. I don't want to scare them away until we have it all worked out. I want to get inside the place and have a look see without tipping them off to the fact that we're on to them."

"We could try breaking in at night, but most likely they have some sort of guard system, maybe even alarms."

Jackie thought for a minute. “There is one way we could get in without arousing any suspicions and have a free hand at exploring the place."

"How's that?"

"As residents,” Jackie answered. “Yesterday I worked as a child. Today we'll go to the other extreme and become two old men. Check with High Camp: I could be mistaken, but it seems to me we have a contact with one of the retirement homes in the area. See if we can get the two of us transferred into Happy Hours."

As usual, Jackie's memory served him well. Rich returned momentarily with the news. “All set,” he said. “Lawndale has already called Happy Hours and arranged to have two residents transferred there temporarily. Happy Hours seemed a little reluctant at first, but they finally agreed on condition that we would only be staying a week."

"Any information on Happy Hours?"

"Some. It's been around a few years. It had an honest reputation but it was having lots of financial problems. Then a few months ago the financial problems seemed to clear up. Our contact wasn't sure, but he

thought someone else had bought out the place and that the management was only acting as a front."

"Sounds logical. What time are we to arrive there?"

"A car will pick us up in an hour. We're now the Jones brothers. I'm seventy-two. You're sixty-nine."

"My favorite number."

By the time the car arrived to pick them up Jackie and Rich had completely transformed their appearances. Using makeup especially developed by C.A.M.P. and their considerable skills as actors they had managed to age themselves incredibly. Instead of standing straight and brawny Rich was now so stoop shouldered as to be almost humpbacked. His skin was pale and wrinkled, his eyes set in dark hollows. His gray hair, only half-combed, spilled over a furrowed brow.

Jackie seemed to have shriveled almost to nothing. He appeared even slimmer than usual and he, too, stood with a stoop. His hands, gnarled and ugly, shook ceaselessly. A nervous mannerism kept his jaw in constant motion.

"It's like a look into the future," Rich said, studying his reflection in the mirror. "Scary isn't it?"

Jackie shrugged. "I never worry much about it. When I really get to this stage I'll just put on some extra makeup, go sit on a barstool, and clack my gums at the pretty young things who go by. I might even enjoy being a painted lady."

The car that came for them bore lettering on its side that said it came from the Lawndale Rest Home and was driven by a uniformed driver. Everything was being done to maintain their new identities.

There was no reason to expect any difficulty. Nonetheless, Jackie had been careful to hide his derringer inside the small case he carried. He intended to take no chances this time. Twice he had been within inches of breaking this case only to find that his adversaries had moved faster. This time he would be ready for them.

Happy Hours seemed an innocent enough place. They were met by a resident housekeeper who escorted them to the office of the manager, Mr. Charles. He was a thin, shrewd-looking man who explained to them briefly the rules of the house.

"Since you are not bedridden or otherwise incapacitated," he said, looking over the forms that had been sent with them, "you'll more or less have the run of the place, with certain exceptions. You are to stay on the grounds unless you have permission to leave, and of course the offices are off limits. But we have a nice patio and you'll have your private rooms. In addition, there's a reading room and a television room. You are neither one employed I take it?"

"No," Jackie replied, "but as a matter of fact if you happen to know any way that a pair of old codgers could make a few dollars we'll work hard. I look puny, but I'm still as strong as a horse."

He lifted one palsied hand into the air. Mr. Charles remained unimpressed. "Any particular experience?"

"Well," Rich thought for a moment, "I have worked as a Santa Claus in the past, but I guess it's rather late in the season to get anything of that sort."

"Rather," Mr. Charles agreed. "Anything else?"

"I worked as a lifeguard once," Jackie offered. "Course I was a few years younger then."

Mr. Charles appeared to lose interest in the subject. "If anything should come up I'll keep the two of you in mind, but since you're only here for a week I don't suppose anything will. You may go to your rooms now and make yourselves comfortable. Dinner is at seven, bedtime at ten."

"Which way to the ladies' dorm?" Jackie asked with a sly wink.

Mr. Charles raised an amused eyebrow. "Ladies' dorm? But didn't you know? Happy Hours is a gentleman's home."

"Oh well, I don't mind that either to tell the truth," Jackie cackled hoarsely, then went into a fit of coughing. The housekeeper, a matronly Miss Bugle, showed them out and led the way to their rooms.

"Just leave your things there for the present," she told them, "and I'll take you down and introduce you to some of our other guests."

"Sure thing," Jackie said. "What about you, sweets? What do you do for jollies?"

"I beg your pardon?" She gave him a startled look.

"Say, that's not a bad thought," Rich agreed, clucking his tongue. "What do you say, maybe the three of us could get a little party going? Start with some strip poker and take it from there."

"I don't play poker," she informed them coldly, but she moved to the open door as though afraid they really might attack her. "And employees do not fraternize with the guests."

"Oh, a virgin, huh?" Jackie said dryly. "And at your age, too. You should be ashamed."

"If anyone should be ashamed it's you," she sputtered, "talking like a young hellion. I'll show you the patio now." Exchanging winks, Jackie and Rich followed her.

There were a dozen or so elderly gentlemen seated about the patio, some reading, some talking, and others just staring into space. They all turned as the newcomers came through the door and Jackie and Rich were looked over thoroughly.

"Not bad," one wavering voice commented.

"Too old," another said. "Myself, I go for the young stuff. Nothing over fifty."

"Well, I like tall men, I don't care how old they are," the first one argued.

"Shush," Miss Bugle scolded them. "We have two new guests with us for a few days—the Jones brothers. This is Tom and the tall one is John. I want you all to make them feel at home."

"What'd she say about feeling?" one of the men yelled, thumping the case of his hearing aid. "Are we all supposed to feel them?"

"Oh shut up, Grace," another retorted. "That thing has about as much juice left in it as you do."

"Who's juiced?" was the angry reply.

"Now, now." Miss Bugle clapped her hands and shot angry looks at the quarrelsome two.

Jackie and Rich, recovering from their surprise, looked at each other. This was something they had never thought of. It looked as though

Happy Hours, far from being an ordinary rest home, was actually an old queen's home.

"Come on, doll," one of the residents said, clicking his false teeth at Jackie, "drop your meat down over here and tell me all the dirt. How are the bars in town these days? Still hot? And what's this I hear about cleaning up Pershing Square?"

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Chapter 7

All in all Happy Hours promised to be a rather interesting place. Jackie and Rich found themselves the center of attention for the next half hour. After that things settled back down a bit and the newness of their visit wore off. Rich had been put down by one or two of the guests as rough trade, although a half dozen others still hovered around him. Jackie had been taken over by a gossipy little thing eager to hear all the news from outside.

"Heavens, you sound as though you've been in prison," Jackie commented after a session of questions and answers.

"Oh no, we can go out if we want—at least most of us can. But I'll tell you the truth, after a while you just get so you don't want to."

"I can't imagine getting in a rut like that," Jackie said.

"Humphf. You're a lot younger than I am, I suppose that's the difference. But it's just that in here we aren't freaks. Or at least we're all equally freaky. There's nobody to stare or poke fun."

"I suppose people can be cruel," Jackie agreed. He had never really thought of that before, and yet it was true, especially in the gay set where youth was highly prized.

"I'm surprised you've never run into that sort of thing," his companion said, giving Jackie a curious look.

Jackie recovered quickly, realizing he had nearly given his true age away. "Oh, I have, now that I think of it, but to tell the truth I usually keep myself pretty busy so I just don't pay much attention to that sort of thing."

"Busy?" There was an unmistakable note of bitterness. "I used to try that till I got tired of the kind of stuff they dream up to keep us old wrecks busy—knitting and needlepoint, my foot. I'd as soon sit here and rot like the rest of the bunch."

"But there must be lots that you could do," Jackie argued. "Especially now during the Christmas holidays."

"Oh Christmas is worst of all. Or at least it usually is, until this year. This year it's been better."

Jackie's interest quickened. “What's different about this year?"

His confidant glanced around then spoke in a slightly lowered voice. “This year most of us have been working, as Santa Claus in the stores around town."

"Oh is that all? Why, my brother John has done that himself a few times."

"No, no that's not all of it. It's all part of some big deal, although to tell the truth I don't know much about it. But the fellows are working on something special and they get paid twice too, once by the store and once by some men who come around here every couple of days. Most of us have got tidy little nest eggs stashed away by now."

"But why should you get paid twice?"

"Confidentially, I think it's some sort of espionage thing, at least that's how it looks to me. But we aren't supposed to ask questions, we just do as we're told. Old Pete, he was the one that started it all. He went to work for some people and then he came back here and started recruiting the rest of us."

"Maude, you've got diarrhea of the mouth,” somebody said from across the patio. “If you don't stop with all that talk I'm going to tell Pete as soon as he comes home from Ballocks."

So that was it, Jackie thought. Pete must have been the Santa that he met yesterday at Ballocks. He had been hired by the gang and then had come back here and trained the others to act as ignorant dupes. It was an ugly business, taking advantage of these lonely old queens.

"I suppose it must be very exciting,” Jackie said aloud, “but there are so many other things you could do to occupy your time."

"Such as?"

Jackie thought for a moment. “Well, even if you can't manage to give presents you could still give of yourselves. Think of all the other lonely people in this city. Why don't you have a party?"

"A party? Oh, we couldn't do that."

"Why not? I'm sure the home wouldn't object, and it couldn't cost much to provide some iced tea or lemonade. Or you could ask the guests to bring their own. But the important thing is, you could all provide one another with some company.

"I don't know," the other said hesitantly. He was clearly considering the question though. "Do you think it could be done?"

"Of course. I'll tell you what, I'll speak to Mr. Charles myself. If he has no objections we could have him call the managers of some of the other rest homes. If they all pooled their resources, refreshments should be no problem."

"Yes," Maude said, warming to the idea, "and we could give presents. Not expensive ones, but little toys and things. Everyone could afford a quarter or fifty cents. And the ones who are working in the department stores could pick everything up at discounts."

"Now you're getting the idea," Jackie said. "Look, suppose you talk to the other residents. My brother and I will take care of speaking to Mr. Charles."

"Girls, this one has had a marvelous idea," Maude called to the others on the patio. "We're going to throw a grand party. Oh, think of it, all kinds of fresh meat running around the place."

While he began explaining about the party Jackie gave Rich a nod and the two of them drifted slightly apart. "Use the transmitter in my case," Jackie instructed him. "Tell High Camp to detain Pete, the Santa at Ballocks. I want him to come up missing."

"Sure," Rich said, "but what will that accomplish?"

"They'll have to come up with someone to replace him tomorrow and we've already made it known that you've had experience in that line. With any luck they'll be in touch with you about going to work."

While Rich slipped away to his room to carry out the instructions Jackie made his way to Mr. Charles's office. Briefly he explained his idea about the party. "I think it would be very worthwhile. Your people are all despondent and feel useless, but there are many things they could be doing. Why, if we had thought of it sooner they could have been entertaining orphans at the various children's homes in the area. Think how good they'd be at that and how much good it would accomplish for others. But for a start they have to learn again how to enjoy themselves, and I think this party would accomplish that."

Mr. Charles was reluctant. “I don't know. All those people in and out of the place. We'd need dozens of attendants."

"Each of the homes you call could send along a couple of nurses or attendants. I'll go even further. My brother and I have a small nest egg stashed away. I'll contribute that to paying for refreshments."

"Well, it's unorthodox, but I suppose there would be no harm in making a few calls and feeling out the other establishments on the idea."

"Great. I'll talk to the other residents here and see if I can't get them all involved in getting things ready for the party. Where is your Christmas tree?"

Mr. Charles squirmed nervously. “We don't have one I'm afraid. Not that we didn't consider it, you understand, but frankly the residents just showed no interest in anything like that."

"How dreary. Well I'll see to that, never you worry about it. And decorations, lots of decorations.” Jackie rose and started for the door.

"Mr. Jones,” Charles called after him, “tell me, why are you doing all this?"

"Why, didn't I explain? It's how I keep myself young.” With that, Jackie jumped spryly into the air and clicked his heels together.

Rich was waiting in their room to inform him that everything would be taken care of as directed. “Fine,” Jackie said. “And one more thing I want a tree and a truckload of Christmas trimmings delivered here today. We're going to have a party."

His suggestion had worked miracles already. By the time they returned to the patio the other patients were in the highest of spirits. They were already dividing up the chores involved. There was no shortage of volunteers to serve punch or to prepare canapés.

Jackie saved the news about the tree as a surprise. A short time later an astonished Miss Bugle led a group of deliverymen into the patio. They were carrying a large tree and crates of ornaments and trimmings. Even Mr. Charles came outside to give the tree a once over and to cast a puzzled glance in Jackie's direction.

"I hope you didn't go too far,” Rich warned quietly. “He might get very suspicious about all this. It's not the sort of thing a couple of

retired old aunties would ordinarily do."

"It was a chance," Jackie agreed, "but I think it will prove to be worth it. In the first place, look how we've already brightened these lonely lives. Anyway, if things get too troublesome we may need a few of these guys for allies."

The rest of the afternoon was a whirlwind of activity. The residents of Happy Hours Rest Home were like children, all of them throwing themselves enthusiastically into transforming the otherwise gloomy place into a fairyland of color and tinsel and Christmas decorations. The excitement rose even higher when Mr. Charles interrupted the work long enough to announce that the party was definitely on.

"Tomorrow night is Christmas Eve. The guests will arrive at eight and stay until nine-thirty. You'll be interested in knowing, by the way, that as a result of our suggestion all the groups are planning to return home and have little midnight parties of their own."

"And we have the Jones brothers to thank for all this. I can't remember when Christmas has been so exciting," Maude said.

"Next year will be even better," another said. "I've got some ideas already. We can start well in advance."

They returned to the joyful preparations. Mr. Charles lingered, however. Jackie saw him approach Rich. The two disappeared inside together. Jackie continued to take part in the preparations for the party, but his thoughts were on Rich and his meeting with Mr. Charles. He had a good idea already what they were discussing.

Rich returned a short time later, slipping unobtrusively back into the activity. Jackie waited until his partner had an opportunity to join him without being conspicuous. "I've been offered a job," Rich said in a low voice. "Just for one day, an emergency sort of thing."

"As Santa Claus?"

Rich nodded. "Seems one of the residents here was working as Santa for Ballocks department store. However, he went out to lunch and didn't return. So they need someone to take his place and Mr. Charles remembered that I'd had some experience."

"Sounds like you're in," Jackie said. "Was there any mention of special instructions?"

"There's to be a meeting tonight. I'll be given my instructions then, after everyone else has gone to bed."

"Oh, darlings, what do you think?" someone yelled at them. "Should we just scatter all this fruit around?"

"I can't think of anything nicer than a lot of fruit all over the place," Jackie called back, to a chorus of laughter and giggles. He, too, was smiling, but not at the humor. HeHe was thinking of tonight's meeting and the fact that Rich would be going to work for the gang. They were near their goal, a firm "in" with the gang and a trail that would lead them to the stolen diamonds.

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Chapter 8

Rich's meeting was to take place after bedtime. He had been instructed to report to the library at 10:30 sharp and to make no mention of the meeting to anyone else.

"I don't know about your going along with me," Rich commented when Jackie suggested it.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. Anyway, at the worst they'll just consider me a little senile and send me off to bed."

"I suppose you're right." Rich glanced at his watch. It was nearly 10:30. He slipped from his bed and put out his cigarette. "Time to go. There's one thing I don't like though, and that's leaving you here all day tomorrow to carry on the masquerade by yourself. Maybe I should ask if they can't find a job for you brotherly concern sort of thing."

"Nonsense, I'll be checking in with C.A.M.P. throughout the day. If I fail to check in they'll know something is amiss. I'll probably be a great deal safer than you. They won't be paying much attention to me but they're sure to keep an eye on you."

It seemed as though the instructions to tell no one of the meeting had been superfluous. Nearly half of the men they had met that day were in the halls and on the stairs, making their way to the library. They waved silently or blew kisses as Jackie and Rich joined them.

Everyone remained silent, however, and the doors to the library were closed. A man, a stranger to Jackie, stood outside the door on guard, but he did not question them when they approached. They were ushered into the library. The seats had been arranged in rows facing the front of the room, where several men were already seated at a table, talking among themselves in whispers. Jackie recognized Mr. Charles but the other three were strangers. His pulse quickened. Unless he was entirely wrong, these men must be part of Birdie's gang.

Perhaps one of them was Birdie Wing himself. Although Jackie had tangled with Birdie before, Birdie was a master of disguise and no one could give an accurate description of his true features.

Jackie and Rich took seats to the rear where they thought to be less

conspicuous. A few more of the residents drifted into the room. Finally *it* seemed as though everyone was present. Mr. Charles stood and greeted them.

"Good evening." Despite his smile there was no real warmth in his voice. "As you all know things have been going nicely. Tomorrow will be the last day for our work and for our little projects. So I wanted first of all to thank you all. I can't explain the full details, but I think I can safely say that you've done a great service for your country."

Jackie was barely able to suppress his rage. So that was it—these ruthless thieves had convinced their elderly dupes that they were working for the benefit of their country. That explained the need for secrecy and why none of them were bothered by any scruples over their activities.

"I think that's everything I have to say," Mr. Charles continued, "so I will turn you over to the man responsible for all this. You all know Mr. Wing, of course."

Jackie tensed, instinctively leaning forward in his seat. So he had been right, he was actually in the same room with the mastermind behind the jewel thefts. He watched intently as a small, birdlike figure stood and cleared his throat.

Birdie Wing looked more like one of the residents of the Happy Hours Rest Home than a master criminal. He was short and spindly. His face was gaunt and angular, with a large nose that did indeed give him the appearance of a bird of prey. His eyes were tiny black dots set back in dark hollows, gleaming wickedly at his audience, yet his voice, when he spoke, was gentle and persuasive, like the song of a wren. One could easily be deceived into believing that this man was harmless. Jackie, however, knew better.

"Thank you," Birdie Wing began. "I want to express my gratitude as well, and I must point out that tomorrow is a vital day. Each of you is responsible for seeing that the work is completed in his own store.

Birdie paused and glanced at some notes in his hand. "Oh, yes, we have a substitute Santa don't we?"

Mr. Charles stood again. "Yes, that would be Mr. Jones. Let's see..."

His eyes scanned the room. Before Rich could stand Mr. Charles had spotted him. And he spotted Jackie as well.

"There seems to be some mistake," he said, "I see both the Mr. Jones are here."

"Yes," Rich said, standing. "My brother and I, you see, we always share our experiences. So I brought him along just to listen."

The group at the table were obviously distressed by this news. "But I thought I instructed you to keep the news of the meeting confidential," Charles said. He cast an anxious glance in the direction of Birdie Wing, who looked furious beneath his smooth exterior.

"What's all this about?" Birdie demanded.

"Nothing, just a slight misunderstanding," Charles insisted. "I'll take care of it at once." He came quickly down through the rows of chairs to where Jackie sat, assuming an air of innocence.

"I'm afraid you'll have to leave," he said in a low voice.

"But..." Jackie tried to argue.

"I'm sorry but I insist. And I must ask you to mention this meeting to no one."

There was nothing Jackie could do but obey. He decided, however, to create as much discord in the leaders of the group as possible.

"I don't see why," he grumbled in a deliberately loud voice as he stood and made his way toward the door. "Everyone in this place knows about it anyway, all this silliness that's been going on."

"What's that?" Birdie demanded.

"Pay no attention," Charles answered. He ushered Jackie quickly toward the door before he could say anything more. Jackie went without protest. He was certain he had already caused plenty of trouble for Mr. Charles and he had long ago learned that his enemies could be more easily defeated if they were divided among themselves. It was disappointing, though, to be forced to leave the meeting. He would have to wait for Rich to fill him in later on the details.

Alone in his room he decided that perhaps the wisest thing would be to get some sleep until Rich returned. He undressed, turned out the light, and climbed into bed. He was trained to catch his sleep where and when he could. It was no problem for him to fall at once into a deep, relaxed sleep.

He was awakened in a most intriguing way. His dreams had been a vivid sort, involving a beautiful young man who had come into his arms and was kissing him warmly. Suddenly it wasn't a dream, there was someone in his arms and wet lips against his.

Rich, he thought at first and then as quickly decided otherwise. This was someone small and lithe, velvety skin melting against his own bare flesh. He responded to the kiss and let his hand slide down the sleek back, over down-covered buttocks. The young man in his arms stirred, pressing and rubbing against him more eagerly. A throbbing hardness was crushed against Jackie's thigh.

Manna from heaven, Jackie thought. Of course, there were all sorts of questions running through his mind but there was a time for questions and a time for action, and all things considered this seemed more like a time for action. His sex life had been rather limited the last few days and he had been trained never to look a gift elephant in the tusk. Besides and this was a most important consideration—his own body was rapidly responding. There were now two lengths of eager hardness crushed between their bodies.

Jackie pulled back slightly and reached down. His fingers found the eager flesh and closed around its silky surface. Not particularly large but a comfortable size, he decided. Ah, well, he thought, running his fingers down to its base, quality is always more important than quantity.

The body in his arms quivered at the touch. Then a hand found Jackie's staff, moving up and down the length of the rigid column. The phantom visitor pulled free of Jackie's embrace. His lips left Jackie's and his mouth began to make its way down Jackie's body.

It was like a trail of fire burning its way over Jackie's tingling skin. The tongue flicked at his nipples and moved onward. This was a true tongue bath and it was done by an expert.

The sensations were incredible. While Jackie moaned with pleasure and wriggled on the bed the hungry mouth explored every inch of his body. It toyed with the broad head of his rigid rod, licking at the sensitive underside. It glided along the thick shaft to its base and teased its way about the heavy sac with its twin weights, then followed the moist, warm valley that ran between the thighs. Jackie's firm buttocks were washed as well and the cleft between them. The tongue inserted itself into him, sending shivers up and down his spine. Even his reside legs the hollows behind his knees and his feet—were

treated to the attention of the sucking, nibbling, licking mouth.

It came back at last to his quivering shaft, rock hard now and throbbing with painful pleasure. For a moment it only teased at the head and then Jackie was drawn into the waiting mouth and throat, in and out, in and out, sucking, urging.

"Yes, yes," Jackie gasped, thrusting up with his hips. His back arched, his hips high in the air, as he gave himself up to the pleasure. His entire being seemed to be sucked from him, his every feeling was concentrated now on the mouth enveloping his ever-throbbing spear.

He could endure the onslaught no longer. Almost before he was aware of it his climax swept over him. He tried to hold back until he could treat his partner to the same pleasure, but it was too late.

"I'm coming," he groaned into the darkness. The sucking became more intense. Lager hands clasped his buttocks, lifting him upward—as though he wanted to escape. There was an instant of suspended animation when time itself seemed to stand still and then he was spewing out a torrent of hot lava into the sucking, hungry mouth. Convulsions raced through him, his body shook and jerked, and at last the flood receded and Jackie sank wearily back to the surface of the bed.

"Whew," he managed to gasp after a long pause. "You're fantastic. But what..."

"Sshh." A hissed warning in the darkness. "One minute."

The bed shook slightly as his partner rose. Jackie had a dim glimpse of him gliding across the dark room. The hail door opened, and for a brief instant Jackie saw him silhouetted in the doorway. Then before Jackie realized what was happening the door closed and the mysterious lover was gone.

In a flash Jackie scrambled from bed and dashed to the door. He was too late though. The hail was empty, its numerous doors closed.

His mysterious lover had disappeared behind one of them. But which one? And why?

He closed his own door and went back to bed. One thing he did know —his visitor had been very young and not one of Happy Hours' residents. His smooth skin and firm young muscles had been proof of that. But if not a resident, then who? Possibly, Jackie thought, part of

Birdie Wing's gang. But they had seen him only in his disguise as an elderly man, not the type, as a rule, to arouse passion in a young man. Anyway, they would hardly be running around the place jumping into beds Willy nilly.

A thought occurred to him perhaps he and Rich weren't the only ones in disguise. Perhaps another of the apparently aged queens was in reality a beautiful, firm-bodied young man—though that didn't seem very probable.

He could think of no really logical explanation for what had occurred. He was sure of one thing, however, it had been a most pleasant diversion. He stretched out on his bed again and waited for Rich to return from his meeting.

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Chapter 9

Rich came in a short time later. They left the light off and sat on the edges of their bed to talk.

"For the most part it's about what we figured," Rich said. "I'm to work at the store as a Santa. The code is still 'Deck the Halls.' When a child gives me the password I'm to pass on one of the special packages, lavender with feather trim. And tomorrow is the big day. From what I gathered most of the stuff has already been delivered. Some of the Santas don't even have to worry about delivering anything tomorrow, but where there are still packages left everything is to be delivered tomorrow. Ballocks happens to be one of the stores where there is still a great deal in the store."

"Any clues as to where the stuff is being delivered?"

"Not a thing. Birdie must have another headquarters from which he operates, but I think it must be fairly near here because I had a chance to ask one of the other residents about him and learned that he pops in and out of here at all hours of the day. And I learned one other piece of information. Not all of the criminals Santas are from Happy Hours. They went over a list of the stores to which each of these fellows was assigned and several of the stores that were robbed were missing from the list."

Jackie thought for a moment. "That could mean that they are using people from other homes, but all the applications we checked referred to Happy Hours. More likely, some of the Santas are actual members of the gang. That makes sense. But that still leaves us with the problem of finding the jewels and it must be done before tomorrow night. After that Birdie Wing will have them all and will fly the coop again."

"What do you think we should do?"

"You'll go ahead with their scheme just as they've instructed you, but I have a plan. There shouldn't be anything suspicious about my dropping by your store tomorrow, since we're brothers. When you hand out one of those lavender packages I intend to follow the child that receives it. He's certain to lead me to the hideout."

"What then?"

"Then I call Upton and have him close in on the place. We can't afford to delay any longer. Even if we lose part of the jewelry we'll have the men responsible and they can lead us to the rest."

Jackie told him about his phantom visitor. “I don't know what it was all about, but it was quite an experience."

"You don't think it might have been a trick?"

"Oh, it was quite a trick all right,” Jackie laughed, “but I see what you mean. No, I don't see what it would have accomplished unless he was to give me a dose of something. Frankly I don't have the vaguest idea, but I can't imagine it was anything serious."

He glanced at his watch. It was nearly one o'clock. “Guess we'd better call it a night,” he said, climbing into his own bed. “Tomorrow promises to be a busy day."

* * * *

Breakfast was served ordinarily at eight. However, the working residents had an early breakfast, so Rich and Jackie did not eat together. By the time Jackie came down for breakfast Rich had already gone.

The home was buzzing with excitement over the upcoming party. Even Jackie found himself caught up in the frivolous mood of the day. He had to admit the place looked entirely different. The tree was trimmed and nearly every room decorated lavishly, giving the entire place a festive atmosphere. Jackie was almost sorry he would miss the party, but if things went as he planned the case would be ended by tonight and he would have no reason to continue in his disguise.

He lingered around the house, socializing with various residents until nearly noon. Then, explaining that he had some last minute shopping to do, he left for downtown. He would have preferred taking his own car, but Mr. Jones was hardly wealthy enough to afford such luxury, so he took the bus instead. One could never tell when one might be observed, even away from the home.

At Ballocks he made a pretense of shopping. He bought a billfold and had it gift wrapped. Then, maintaining his air of innocence, he asked direction for Santa's department.

He would never have recognized Santa as Rich. His partner looked incredibly authentic. He was naturally tall and his body had been padded to make him look monstrously fat as well. His nose was reddened and he wore a long white wig and beard. All in all, Jackie thought, observing him from across the store, he looked a very jolly creature. Rich seemed to be enjoying his work, too. He bounced kiddies on his knee, laughed with belly-shaking abandon, and ho-hoed at every opportunity.

Jackie did not try to make contact. He knew that by this time Rich had undoubtedly seen him and there was no need for them to speak to each other. Jackie lingered about as though he really were just interested in seeing his brother play Santa. His only worry was that he might have to wait too long for a delivery to be made. Mr. Jones could hang around for a short time, but eventually it would begin to appear suspicious.

His fears proved groundless, however. He had counted on the fact that there were still several deliveries to be made today, which would mean fairly frequent scheduling. He was right in his guess. Only a quarter hour after he had arrived in the department Rich came out with a particularly loud “Ho, ho, ho.” Jackie quickly turned in that direction to see Rich hand a lavender package to what appeared to be a little boy.

Jackie pretended to lose interest in the department and drifted away toward the elevator. He watched as the little boy made his way through the crowd of last-minute shoppers, carrying the lavender package conspicuously—there was no reason after all for him to fear detection. Jackie paused at a counter to examine a display of lace while he waited for the “child” with the package to pass.

He had to admit it was a clever disguise. The makeup was the work of an artist, and the gang member stood less than four feet tall. Only the keenest eye would have detected that he was an adult.

Jackie let him pass and enter a down elevator. Then, taking the stairs swiftly, Jackie reached the first floor in time to see his prey head toward the exit. Jackie followed and stopped anxiously when the guard at the door stopped the boy with the package.

His thoughts raced. Had the store's security guards somehow figured out the system? If they detained this boy now it would immediately alert the gang and Birdie Wing would make his escape with most of the jewelry.

He edged closer through the crowds, trying to get within earshot. Should he try to contact Mr. Perce—no, he dismissed that idea at once. There wouldn't be time, for one thing, and for another if the store manager intervened the alert would be given anyway.

He was finally close enough to hear part of the conversation between the guard and the gang's courier. With relief, he realized that the guard was only concerned that the boy had lost his mother.

"No," the boy was saying, in an authentically childish voice, "I'm to meet her down the street at the soda fountain. She said she would wait for me there."

"Well now, maybe I ought to have someone take you along to meet her, just to be sure there's no mix-up," the guard said. He was, Jackie knew, just being helpful, but he couldn't realize what thin ice he was on.

"Oh, that won't be necessary. She often lets me go shopping by myself."

"Does she now? And what did you buy today?"

The boy realized his mistake almost too late—he started to indicate the lavender package and remembered that he had not purchased this. "I promised Santa I would keep it a secret," he answered with his most bashful smile.

The guard roared with laughter. "Oh, I see," he said finally. "Then I guess anybody who can keep a secret that well can find his way to a soda fountain on his own. But you be careful now, and don't dawdle or your momma will worry." He opened the door.

The boy skipped through. "I'll hurry; don't worry," he said, and was on his way down the sidewalk.

Jackie went through the door after him. He paused on the sidewalk, trying to be inconspicuous. The boy walked quickly down the street in the direction of the nearby soda fountain. Then, with a glance over his shoulder to be sure the guard hadn't followed him out, he turned and dashed suddenly across the street. A city bus was just pulling to the curb on the other side. Dodging the traffic neatly the boy reached the other side and in a twinkling was on the bus.

Jackie could not afford to worry about whether he was being watched or not. With all his agility and speed he too dashed across the street,

dodging the heavy stream of cars. He caught sight of a cab going in the same direction as the bus. He waved to it and, scarcely waiting for the cab to slow down, yanked the door open and jumped in.

"Jeez, you move fast for an old geezer," the astonished cabbie exclaimed.

"Thanks, sonny, but I was in a hurry. Follow that bus up ahead, okay?"

"Sure, doc," the cabbie responded, speeding through a light that had started to change. "What's up? Some kind of emergency?"

"The worst," Jackie said. "My wife's seeing another man."

The remark earned him another curious glance, after which the cabbie shrugged and devoted his attention to following the bus through the afternoon traffic. They had gone perhaps a mile when Jackie saw the boy getting off at a bus stop.

"Circle the block," Jackie instructed the cabbie.

"But no one got off there except that little fellow."

"That's the other man," Jackie told him.

They went around the block. By the time they neared the bus stop again the boy had vanished. "Drat," Jackie said aloud.

"Looks like he got away," the cabbie said, by this time beginning to enjoy the adventure. "No, there he is, around the corner at the other bus stop. He's just getting on another bus."

"After him," Jackie ordered. He leaned forward tensely in his seat. He dared not let this boy escape. He would not have another opportunity like this one to find the gang's headquarters.

This time when the boy got off the bus he caught a third one. Jackie had begun to realize they were heading in a circle, probably a standard precaution. They were going in the general direction, however, of Happy Hours. It appeared that Rich was right, that the headquarters were near the rest home.

The boy alighted from the third bus and began to walk down the street. This time it looked like he was near his destination.

"Pull to the curb," Jackie said, "and wait for a minute till I see where he's headed."

The boy rounded a corner. The cab drifted slowly past and Jackie saw the boy turn down a side street. “Okay, drop me here,” he instructed the driver.

He handed the driver a ten, well over the amount on the meter, and jumped from the cab without waiting for any further question. As the cab pulled away Jackie assumed the air of an innocent old man out for a stroll. Walking nonchalantly, he started down the street on the opposite side from the boy.

He did not have far to go. In the next block the boy mounted the steps of an old Victorian house and disappeared inside. Jackie walked slowly past, making a mental note of the address and the layout. He was careful to keep his face more or less turned away from the house to avoid being recognized.

He had gone only half a block past the house when he glanced back in time to see the boy leaving again—without the lavender package. The delivery had been made and Jackie now knew where the jewels were being stashed.

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Chapter 10

The house to which the package had been delivered was only a few blocks from Happy Hours. Jackie was certain that this was the headquarters of the gang, perhaps even Birdie Wing's home.

He wanted no room for error, however. He would have to assure himself that the place was really a base for the gang's operation, and he could not hover about in his present disguise. Someone was certain to recognize Mr. Jones from the rest home.

Fortunately he had come prepared for such an eventuality. The suit that he wore appeared to be only an ordinary inexpensive blue suit, but in reality every article was completely reversible. What's more, concealed within its lining was all the makeup that he needed to change his appearance once again.

He rounded another corner and stepped into a phone booth by the sidewalk, turning his back to the street. Mr. Jones disappeared as Jackie swiftly changed the appearance of his face and became somebody else altogether. He glanced around to be certain no one was nearby and removed his jacket and trousers. When he stepped from the phone booth a few minutes later he was a young man nattily dressed in bright blue slacks and a plaid sports coat.

The house across from the gang's had a For Sale sign in its window and appeared to he empty. Jackie walked slowly back up the street, studying each house with mild interest, and pretended to notice the vacant one. He stopped in front of it, looking at it for a moment, and then mounted the steps to peer in the windows and doors. In actuality he was watching the reflection in the glass of the house across the street.

He came down from the porch and went around the side of the house, still looking it over carefully. His vigil was rewarded. A car pulled up across the way. In one glance Jackie confirmed his deductions. One of the men getting out of the car and hurrying into the house was Birdie Wing.

Jackie needed no further confirmation. With a last glance at the house he had been examining he left and made his way once more to the phone booth around the corner. He had only to change back to Mr.

Jones and call Lou Upton. His work was nearly over. Once all of the diamonds had been delivered they could move in.

So absorbed was he in his triumph, however, that he was not even aware of the woman who approached the phone booth as he changed. He was bent down slipping his feet into the legs of the trousers, so she did not see him until she opened the door. She let out an alarmed squeal.

"What are you doing?" she demanded in a shocked voice, staring at Jackie's seminude body.

"I lost my dime," Jackie answered, trying to pull his trousers up and the door closed. The trousers fell again about his ankles. The woman turned crimson, screamed, and ran off down the street.

"Damn," Jackie thought angrily, yanking his pants up around his waist. That was the difference, he thought ruefully, between real-life crime fighters and the comic book heroes in the comic books they were never interrupted while they changed clothes in phone booths.

He placed his call to Lou Upton and waited anxiously for the familiar voice to answer. "Lou, Jackie here," he said tersely. "We've got them now. Take down the address."

"Wow," Upton exclaimed when Jackie had told him the rest. "I'll close in on them right now and..."

"No, not yet," Jackie interrupted. "We have no way of knowing how much of the jewelry is still in transit. The best thing to do is put a net, but unobtrusively, around the place. I'm on my way back to Happy Hours. I should be able to find out later if everything has been delivered. Then I'll give you the go-ahead and we can catch them with everything."

"Okay, I'll have my boys surround the place quietly. Whenever you're ready we will be too."

The gaiety at the rest home was at a fever pitch as the time for the party drew nearer. If nothing else, Jackie thought, they had accomplished real miracles here by bringing some happiness back into the lives of these men. He had devoted his life to doing good for others, yet it continued to be a source of true pleasure for him.

He could do little more now but wait for Rich's return. Hopefully Rich would be able to learn whether the deliveries were completed. If not,

they would simply wait until midevening and make their move then. Once he gave Upton the go-ahead he and Rich would be on their way to join the forces in raiding Birdie Wing's headquarters.

Rich arrived home shortly after six, still wearing his jolly Santa suit and makeup, and when he first entered their room Jackie momentarily forgot who he was. “Ho, ho, ho,” Rich greeted him. “How'd you like a nice little basket from Santa?"

"The Easter Bunny delivers baskets,” Jackie corrected him with a laugh. “Santa's supposed to offer boxes."

"That's easily arranged, too."

"Later. Things are moving too fast for romance,” Jackie said. He told Rich about his day's work. “Great,” Rich exclaimed. “It's all over then. I stopped in the library on my way in. From what I gather all of the deliveries were made on time. By now the last of the jewels should have been delivered."

"That's all I wanted to know. I'll contact C.A.M.P. and have them give Upton the go-ahead. Then you and I can cut out of here."

He reached for the case in which his radio equipment was concealed. Before he had time to open it, though, the door to the room suddenly opened with a bang. Birdie Wing was followed by Mr. Charles and a stranger, a beautiful young man, small and sexy. Something about the young man was vaguely familiar, but for the moment Jackie could not identify him, These three were followed by three others wearing Santa Claus outfits, but there was nothing jolly about them. They looked like hoods with brawny builds and hard ruthless eyes, and each of them carried a gun pointed at Jackie and Rich.

"What's the meaning of this intrusion?” Jackie demanded. “And what are those men doing with guns?"

"I'll ask the questions if you don't mind,” Birdie snapped, his angular face thrust forward. “To start with, just who are you?"

"I should ask the same thing.... Oh, yes, you're the man who was at that meeting last night Mr. Ding, or Dong, something like that wasn't it?"

"Very funny.” There was no trace of humor in Birdie's expression. “I'm still waiting to know who you are."

Jackie turned to Mr. Charles. “You could have saved these gentlemen all this trouble. Our names and pertinent information were on the forms we brought with us if you'll recall."

"Yes, they call you the Jones brothers,” Birdie answered for Charles. “Two sweet little old gentlemen.” He turned to the beautiful young man. “Tell me, Baby Lou, did you do as I instructed last night?"

"Yes. I came here to Mr. Jones's room."

"It was you,” Jackie said, astonished. He saw now, too late, the purpose of that mysterious visit. Baby Lou grinned and nodded.

"Yes, and it was heavenly. I don't know when I've enjoyed anyone so much."

Jackie blushed modestly. “Thank you, but the pleasure was all mine I assure you. In fact, I've been hoping ever since that we could get together again and perhaps get better acquainted. Anyway, I owe you..."

"Never mind your courtship,” Birdie snapped. “Lou, tell me what Mr. Jones's body was like."

Lou sighed. “It was dreamy. Very smooth and firm and youthful."

Birdie grinned wickedly. “Would you say Mr. Jones was anywhere near seventy years old?"

Baby Lou's eyes widened. “Oh, heavens no. He can't be more than a few years older than me, unless he had some miracle treatment."

"I take care of myself, that's all,” Jackie insisted, but he knew that it was useless. He had been tricked into revealing that he was not an elderly man at all.

"I'll bet,” was Birdie's sarcastic reply. “Let's see how well you take care of your hair.” With that he stepped closer and yanked at Jackie's gray hair. The wig came away in his hand, revealing Jackie's blond hair.

"Just as I thought,” Birdie cackled triumphantly. “There's only one person in the world with that cornsilk and the guts to pull a stunt like this. I believe we've had dealings before, haven't we Mr. Holmes?"

"Holmes?” Charles's eyes widened in terror. “Not Jackie Holmes, surely?"

"None other," Birdie assured him.

"Then that means C.A.M.P."

"Exactly. I thought they were into this when things started going wrong, and there's only one person in the world who could successfully impersonate Shelley Tipple. Well this is one time when they're going to be outsmarted."

"You're too late," Jackie told him haughtily. "But tell me one thing. Why did you wait until now if you knew last night?"

Birdie laughed smugly. "Because we needed another Santa and your stupid friend here helped us finish up our work. I knew you wouldn't do anything until the job was completed. And now, Mr. Holmes, you won't have time to contact C.A.M.P."

"What makes you think I haven't already?" Jackie tossed his head in disdain.

"Because I've had that case of yours bugged," Birdie said, indicating the case that held Jackie's radio equipment. "You haven't sent any messages since you came back in the afternoon."

He signaled to the three hoods in the Santa outfits. "Take them to the attic," he ordered. "I'll question them there, the usual way."

Jackie shuddered at the implied threat. Birdie Wing meant to torture them, and he had no doubt that the vicious criminal would have some particularly horrendous system of torture for such occasions.

"Birdie, you're making a great mistake," Jackie warned him. "You know that justice will triumph in the end, as it always does."

"Hah! Who ever heard of justice for fairies?"

"But that's exactly what C.A.M.P. is dedicated to," Jackie argued. "There's still time for you to mend your ways. You would have to pay your debt to society, of course, but after that you could work with us. With your mind and abilities you could do a great deal for the homosexuals of the world."

Birdie's answer was to spit disdainfully on the floor. "What do I care for the homosexuals of the world? I'm going to buy the world and then I'll make my own justice. You silly frump, I now have the world's largest collection of diamonds. Soon I will have all of the world's

wealth. Then the world will be mine, including your silly High Camp. I'll buy that giddy outfit."

Jackie's eyes flashed with anger. “Say what you will about me,” he declared hotly, “but I'll not stand here and have you bandy about the name of High Camp. It stands throughout the world as a pillar of strength and comfort to every unfortunate gay person. And it will continue to stand as such no matter what you do to me or to Rich. Others will take our place and they will never rest until your sort has been brought to terms."

"Enough of this,” Birdie yelled, his own temper flaring. “Take them to the attic."

The three hoods brandished their guns. Jackie exchanged a glance with Rich. The odds were against them, but they had been in tight situations before. They would simply have to wait for their opportunity and then overpower these thugs.

They went first up the stairs, the armed Santas following with guns at the ready. Birdie Wing, Charles, and Baby Lou brought up the rear. Jackie had not been to the attic before. He expected it to be dusty and filled with stored items. In fact, when the door opened inward it proved to be a charming little apartment with its own fireplace and comfor(able furnishings.

"Just one of my little hideaways,” Birdie said from behind them.

"I'll see to it that you are comfortable here."

"I doubt that,” Jackie replied. His muscles were tensed, waiting for the right moment.

"Bring out those racks,” Birdie ordered. Two of the men turned to do his bidding. For a moment the attention of the third guard was diverted.

"Now"’ Jackie yelled suddenly. He dived low, catching the man's legs in a flying tackle. They crashed to the floor, the man's gun clattering out of his hand.

Moving with lightning speed that belied his massive size, Rich sprang into action as well. In one swoop he had lifted a coffee table from the floor and hurled it as the other two hoods whirled about. It hit them both and their guns fell, too. Without pause Rich dived for them.

For all that he looked withered and harmless, however, Birdie Wing proved to be a nimble adversary. His hand flashed to a switch on the wall. Instantly a concealed panel fell open. There was a screeching cry, a fluttering sound, and from the chamber within emerged two huge condors, talons flexing, eyes viciously bright. Birdie gave a call, something between a hoot and a whistle, and with a beating of wings the two birds soared into the air and swooped down on Rich.

"Rich, look out," Jackie cried, even while he struggled with his adversary.

Rich whirled and saw the two vicious birds rushing toward him. He dodged, but his foot caught on a chair and he toppled backward. In an instant the birds were upon him.

Jackie let go of his opponent and grabbed for the gun, but Birdie reached it first. "Unless you tell him to surrender," Birdie snapped breathlessly, "I'll let my pets rip him to shreds."

"We surrender," Jackie said without hesitation. Rich was all but hidden by the flashing wings.

At another call from Birdie the condors lifted into the air and swooped back to their cage. Jackie had a glimpse of Rich, blood streaming down his face and over the white heard he still wore, then the room suddenly exploded. A million lights flashed in Jackie's head, followed by blackness.

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Chapter 11

Jackie came to with a dull throbbing in his head and a strange topsy-turvy sensation as though the world were upside down.

It was a moment before he could comprehend the meaning of this feeling. When he finally opened his eyes, however, he saw that the world was indeed upside down—or more accurately he was upside down. He had been tied to a rack not unlike a sawhorse, his body across it so that his torso was uppermost and his limbs and head were hanging down on either side. His clothes had been removed and his naked backside was completely vulnerable to any attack. In fact, he was being attacked as he wakened. There was a painfully massive presence within him, pistoning deeply into him. His hips were in the firm grasp of two brawny hands, and he was gradually aware of the hoarse breathing over him.

Something moved in front of him and he looked up into Birdie's evil face. “I thought that would bring you around,” the master criminal said. “I've never known anyone to sleep through getting screwed by Andy."

Jackie glanced past him. Rich, too, had been stripped and tied down and was being attacked by another of the hoods. The attacker had removed his red trousers, but from the waist up he was still Santa Claus. It was a peculiar sight, and at another time Jackie might have regarded it as amusing to see his friend being plowed by the familiar symbol of Christmas, but there was nothing funny about the situation they were in. Rich's face was twisted in pain from the activity to which he was not accustomed. Jackie could see the stiff flesh driving in and out of his partner's defenseless body, appearing then disappearing then appearing again at a furious pace. His own buttocks were being pounded at the same time, so savagely that despite his greater experience in this realm he nevertheless had to struggle against the urge to cry out in pain.

"This is just a light treatment,” Birdie said with a smirk. “The last person we worked over got his eyes pecked out."

"Peck away. He'll never get to my eyes this way,” Jackie told him, “Anyway, he's far from having the right pecker for the job."

"You won't be so amused by the time we're finished," was the angry reply.

The man behind him, however, was nearly finished. The pounding had reached breakneck speed and bone-jarring force. The rack to which Jackie was tied shook with each merciless lunge.

"I'm ... coming.., boss," the man croaked.

"Me too," the one behind Rich yelled.

There was a final shuddering thrust, and Jackie felt the unwelcome flood pouring into him in hot, gushing spurts. He closed his mind to the indignity of it. It was over finally and he felt the receding pressure of withdrawal. When he looked over at Rich, Santa had finished, too.

"Now then," Birdie said, "having opened up some channels of communication, let's get down to business. I want to know all about your silly C.A.M.P. where it's located, who the people in it are, what sort of codes you use the works. Make like a songbird."

For an answer Jackie pursed his lips and whistled like a canary.

"Very funny. But you'll change your tune I can assure you. I have ways of making people talk."

"Not these people," Rich told him firmly. "If you thought that little session with your barely hung apes would scare us, you're mistaken. We'll never tell you what you want to know."

"No?" There was an evil glint in Birdie's eye. "We'll see. Baby Lou, let's try the cock test."

Baby Lou's eyes went wide with horror. "No, not that, boss," he said weakly. "It's too ... too cruel, even for these two."

"Do as I tell you," Birdie commanded.

His eyes still wide, his hands shaking, Baby Lou walked out of Jackie's range of vision. Jackie's mind raced as he tried to envision what the cock test would be. Undoubtedly it would be something utterly horrible and inhuman, but he had no fear for himself or for Rich. Nothing would ever convince either of them to betray the oath they had taken as members of C.A.M.P.

"One last chance," Birdie warned them. "Will you tell me what I want

to know?"

"Never," they both answered in unison.

Birdie only smiled. "We'll see," he said. "All right, Baby Lou, give him a sample."

At first Jackie tried to show no reaction, but it was more than ever his nerves of steel could stand. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, to no avail. Finally, he could no longer hold back. His body began to shake and then helplessly he began to giggle and to laugh aloud.

The feather started on his bottom, the faintest touch that grew more unbearable with each tickling motion. It moved lightly down the valley between his cheeks and then danced around and around the tiny opening.

Maddening as this was, it was only the beginning. The feather moved on after a time and the tickling grew worst. It brushed along the ridge between Jackie's parted thighs and finally reached the free-hanging baubles. It hovered, returned, went away, and then came back, tickling Jackie's balls mercilessly.

"Oh, ho, ho, ha ha ha, hee hee hee," Jackie roared with laughter. Tears streamed down his cheeks and his chest and sides began to ache with the effort. Still the feather brushed and stroked and teased the twin heavy orbs.

"Enough?" Birdie asked.

"I'll ... ha ha ha ... never ... hee hee ... talk!" Jackie managed to answer.

"It gets worse," Birdie warned. He now had a long Freecock feather in his hand. "Okay boys, let's help Lou out with this. But gently boys, gently."

It seemed impossible that it could have gotten worse, but it did. A feather made its way down each of Jackie's legs finally reaching his feet. Then each foot was tickled. Another feather started at his ribs and worked its way to his armpits. Jackie felt as though he were in the throes of convulsions. His entire body ached, yet he could not stop his gales of laughter. Worst of all was the feather still tickling his balls, moving lightly back to his upturned butt then back to his balls again.

"In the name of heaven," Rich yelled, his face torn with anxiety, "have mercy on him."

"You're next," was all Birdie said with a gleeful laugh. "My dears, isn't this a ball?"

"They're both nice," Baby Lou chirped.

"Keep your mind on your work," Birdie ordered. "Swish, darling, swish."

It seemed to go on and on endlessly, worse than anything Jackie had ever endured or even imagined. Of all the weapons he had faced in his career, none was as diabolical or as maddening as the Freecock feather. He could do nothing but shake with laughter and pray that it would soon be over.

He tried to close his mind to what was happening. He thought of Upton, waiting at Birdie's house. But Upton was no solution because Lou was waiting for a signal from him, and until then he would do nothing but wait. By the time he realized that no signal was forthcoming it might be too late.

"Damn you, will you talk or won't you?" Birdie shrieked. His feather had begun to move more slowly.

If only I can hold out a little longer, Jackie thought. "Ha ha ha. never ... hee hee."

"I'm getting tired, boss," Baby Lou complained.

"Keep that feather moving," Birdie yelled. But it was plain that all of them were tiring. Their strokes were heavier and slower and slightly less agonizing. A little longer, Jackie told himself over and over—just a little longer.

"You stubborn bitch!" Birdie swore. In a rage he hurled his feather to the floor. "No one has ever been able to endure this treatment."

Jackie could only gasp with relief as the tickling stopped. His laughter continued briefly and his skin still tingled from the onslaught, but he had survived without breaking under the strain. He felt as though he had just wakened from a dreadful nightmare.

"Very well," Birdie said in a calmer voice. "But you'll regret your stubbornness. Had you talked you might have lived to work with us,

maybe even someday become part of our gang."

"I'd die first," Jackie snapped.

"Indeed that's just what I was thinking, and this room will be your graveyard."

"You wouldn't dare kill us here and we all know it," Jackie replied. He was stalling for time, but he was certain he was correct in that guess. "There are too many other people in this building who would be witnesses to your crime."

Birdie remained unperturbed. "Not at all," he said. "Because you see my little chickadee, they are going to die with you.'

At this new evidence of the man's ruthlessness Jackie shuddered.

"You can't mean you're going to kill everyone in the place?"

"Of course I am, you silly thing. I've finished with them. You certainly don't think I would leave them around to tell tales when I am in flight. But don't worry, it will all be done very nicely. You'd be amazed at how considerate I am."

"You're a vulture."

Birdie only laughed as though he were flattered by the description. "Right now your aunties downstairs are having a little party which I understand you so thoughtfully suggested. In a short time their guests will leave. Then out of the goodness of my heart I've arranged an extra special something for them. There will be a quiet little party just for the residents of Happy Hours and I have provided the punch."

"Poison," Jackie guessed at once.

"Well, sort of. Actually just a sleeping draught so that they will all slumber soundly. Very, very soundly. That's so there won't be a lot of ruckus when the fire breaks out."

"Fire?"

"Yes. That way, you see, all the evidence goes up in smoke, including you two beauties. Isn't that thorough?"

"You'll never get away with it," Rich warned. "They'll find our bodies tied like this and they'll know the truth."

"Tut, you don't think I'm going to fall for that ruse. You want me to untie you so you'll have a fighting chance. Oh, no. You'll be untied all right, but only after you've been put to sleep too with a little injection in your luscious fannies."

It was a horrible scheme, one that staggered Jackie's imagination. He could think of no way to prevent *it.*

"All right, boys," Birdie addressed his henchmen. "I'm going to fly the coop. You two stay here—one of you is to play Santa downstairs, don't forget. Wait until ten o'clock—that's less than an hour away then come back up here and give our little lovebirds their shots. After that you know how to start the fire. As old and dry as this place is it will all go in a matter of minutes. By that time we'll be winging our way South for the winter."

"Your wings will be clipped," Jackie told him sternly.

"Oh, girl, don't you ever get tired of all that pap? It's too bad you had to get mixed up with the wrong crowd. I really could have used you in my organization."

"For the last time," Jackie said, "untie us and surrender, Birdie. It's your only chance to redeem yourself. Once you've committed this ghastly crime there will be no turning back for you. Think of Lady Macbeth."

"That old crow? Her trouble was she married a sparrow instead of a hawk. But I'll give you one more chance. If you'll talk now I'll spare your lives and have you brought with us. Don't you see? We could take over C.A.M.P. You wouldn't be an underling; you'd be the top bird. Together we could rule the world."

"History has shown that such power only leads to unhappiness. No, I don't want to rule the world with you. And you forget, in our organization no man is an underling. Save your breath, Birdie, and save the lives of those innocent people downstairs."

"Pshaw. Well, I tried. You boys know what you're to do. When you ye got the fire going here cut out fast and fly to the house. We'll be on the wing in no time."

He went to the door. As it opened Jackie could hear the distant sound of singing voices blended in "Silent Night." The party downstairs was in progress.

Birdie turned back for one final glance at the captives. “Bye, dears. Have a lark,” he said, and then he was gone, the closing door shutting out the sound of singing.

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Chapter 12

"Seems a pity," Baby Lou said with wistful glances at Jackie and Rich. "He was so good in bed." Then with a wave of his hand he and the two hoods left also. Jackie and Rich were alone and helpless.

"What about Upton?" Rich asked. "Any chance of his rescuing us?"

"None," Jackie answered grimly. He explained that Upton was waiting only a few blocks away for the signal to move in on Birdie's house. "There's one consolation. Birdie can't escape. If Upton sees them flying the coop he'll stop them, signal or no. But by that time, of course, this place will be up in smoke and us with it."

"I can see the wall clock and it's almost nine-thirty now. We've only got half an hour."

Jackie searched his mind for some hope. "If only we could get free we could take care of everything." He strained against the ropes that held him but it was useless.

"It's a hell of a way to spend Christmas Eve is all I've got to say," Rich complained bitterly.

"That's right, it is Christmas Eve isn't it? With everything else I had forgotten." Jackie thought of the other holiday seasons they had spent together, happy times with glowing fires and music and tight-fit togetherness. Unless some miracle occurred this would he their last one together.

The minutes dragged by. Faint sounds from below indicated that the party was breaking up. Once the party ended Birdie's dire plan would be set into motion.

"Quarter till," Rich reported sadly. They both struggled against their bonds, but to no avail. "Five till." The situation was hopeless. There was nothing they could do but wait for the end.

A faint scuffling sound broke the stillness. At first Jackie thought it was the thugs coming to do their dirty work. Then he realized that the sounds, like footsteps, were overhead. There was a moment of stillness then more noises from the chimney of the fireplace. A cloud of soot

descended, followed by two booted feet and then a flurry of lavender and white.

The man who clambered from the fireplace looked much like the bogus Santas with whom Jackie and Rich had been dealing throughout this case—he was elderly, plump, and white whiskered. His costume, however, was lavender instead of red and it was trimmed in what Jackie, who was an expert in furs, recognized at once as chinchilla.

"Mercy," he exclaimed, brushing soot and ashes off his clothes, "I've been in some dirty holes in my time, but that one takes the cake."

Jackie guessed at once that he was another member of the gang, although he was puzzled by the difference in costume and the unorthodox entrance. "Why are you in lavender?" he asked. "Isn't that a bit odd even for your group?"

"Yes, I must admit it is." He looked himself over. "If you must know I had some problems with my tailor. Seems they had a run on Santa suits this season and he was all out of the usual cloth. So he substituted this. But to tell the truth I didn't mind. I think it's rather fetching actually. I always thought red made me look sallow."

"And why are you sneaking in that way?" Rich asked.

"Well, for one thing I couldn't very well just come in the front way if I'm going to get you untied. My, I must say you're showing your best sides aren't you?" He chuckled at his own joke, his round belly shaking.

"You're going to untie us?" Jackie asked, astonished. "But why? You mean you're going to double-cross Birdie?"

"Double, schmuble. It's the sort of thing I'm supposed to do, although it's a bit unusual even for me. Now, let's see, where should I start?"

"Better get our hands untied first," Jackie said. There were other questions he wanted to ask, but time was running out. This apparently was not one of Birdie's men—probably, he thought, one of Upton's agents or perhaps even another man from C.A.M.P. But that would have to wait for later discussion.

"Let's see, I should have a penknife here somewhere—yes, here it is." The Santa cut the ropes holding Rich's hands then came to free Jackie while Rich untied his own feet. In a minute they were both free,

rubbing sore muscles.

"Now let's clear up a few things," Jackie said to their benefactor. At that moment, however, he heard the sounds of footsteps on the stairs. "Too late; here comes trouble." He glanced around the room. "We'd better get you undercover somewhere."

"Oh, that's no problem, and I'd just as soon be spared any fisticuffs if you don't mind." The Santa hurried to the fireplace. "If you're sure you can handle things."

"Don't worry about that. But hurry, they're almost here."

"Cheerio, then—and Merry Christmas." With that and a flash of lavender he was gone back up the chimney.

None too soon. Even as Jackie turned from the fireplace the door opened. This time, though, he and Rich were in control of the situation. They charged together, catching the two thugs by surprise.

The man Jackie tackled was nearly twice his size, but he was no match for Jackie and this time there was no one to release the birds. Jackie lifted the heavy body from the floor and sent it crashing against a wall. Before the man could recover a fist in his jaw put him out cold. Rich's opponent had fared no better.

Jackie snatched up the gun the thug had dropped. "Quick, go to your room and give Upton the signal. If he strikes now he'll catch them all in their vile nest."

Without waiting for Rich to reply Jackie raced down the stairs. His first thought was of the punch that had been prepared for the residents. Only a sleeping potion Birdie had said, but Jackie knew better than to trust a criminal. Besides, many of the men downstairs were in frail health a strong sleeping draught might be more than some of them could take.

At the last landing he vaulted the stairs, landing in the hail below with a thud. He raced to the library and threw the doors open. Mr. Charles was by the punch howl, ladle in hand.

"And now," he said just as Jackie burst into the room, "the first cup of punch will be served."

There was an instant of astonishment as Jackie, still naked, came through the doors. Without hesitation Jackie fired the gun. His aim

was flawless. The punch howl shattered, its liquid contents cascading over the table and onto the floor.

"Don't move, Mr. Charles," Jackie ordered.

The entrance had created quite a commotion. The residents of Happy Hours stared and giggled and tittered. Nor did the excitement lessen when Rich strode into the room a minute later, naked as well, with his mind-boggling equipment flopping heavily from side to side. Miss Bugle fainted.

"Merciful heaven," someone screamed, "It's the Jones brothers—and they've become children again."

"Not quite," Jackie answered with a grin. "I'll explain in a minute. But first someone find something to tie up Mr. Charles."

Within minutes Mr. Charles had been trussed like a Christmas goose while the aging queens twittered and clucked and stared agog at Rich's magnificent body. Jackie took a call from Upton to learn that the entire gang, including Birdie Wing, had been captured in the raid.

"And we got the jewels," Upton said. "Every last one of them. It was a perfect score."

Jackie and Rich took time to dress themselves before rejoining the group in the library, despite the insistence of several persons that it wasn't at all necessary.

It took rather a long while to explain everything to their audience, what with interruptions and questions and exclamations of surprise. "I hope you'll forgive us," Jackie concluded, "for deceiving you the way we did, but it was necessary to bring these evil people to justice."

"Don't apologize," Maude said. "We're the ones who should do that. For being taken in by these hoodlums in the first place. And besides, we owe you a vote of thanks for all you've done to make our Christmas an unforgettable one. We're already working on plans for next year. A year ago I couldn't wait to die. Now I'm not going to go even if the grim reaper comes for me. I'm having too much fun thinking of all the things I can do to make others happy."

"And I suppose," another said, "we have you to thank for these, too.

Jackie looked in the direction indicated, toward the Christmas tree. To his amazement presents of every sort were piled under the tree.

"No, I can't take credit for that," Jackie said. "Someone apparently wanted to see you happy. Maybe even one of Birdie's fake Santas."

He paused and snapped his fingers.

"Good heavens," he said to Rich, "we forgot our friend, the one who freed us."

"You're right. Come on, we'd better rescue him from the roof. He must be frozen by now."

They hurried back to the attic and called up the chimney that everything was all right now. There was no answer.

"He must have been frightened out of his wits," Jackie said. "I guess we'd better get the ladder and go up for him."

There was no one on the roof, however. They stared about, puzzled. "What's this?" Rich asked, stooping down. "Why, it's ... but it can't be, that's impossible. This is Los Angeles."

Jackie knelt beside him. "Snow," he said, running his finger through the cold, white drift. Hardly what you would expect to find on a rooftop in Los Angeles but there it was, all but covering the roof to the very edge. "And tracks," he added. "Like hoof prints. And here, a track like a sleigh runner or something of that sort.

"They lead right over to the edge of the roof," Rich said, walking to the edge to look down. "No, nothing down there." He paused, cocking his head. "Listen—did you hear someone shout?"

"Yes," Jackie said softly. He looked up at the clear, starlit sky. In the distance the lights of an airplane winked on and off.

"It's crazy," Rich said. "It sounded like someone calling..."

"That's what it was," Jackie assured him. "Merry Christmas—and to all, a good night."

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The Son Goes Down

Chapter 1

Lou Upton was only slightly over forty, but he gave the impression of being older. Balding and showing a tendency toward fatness, especially about the waist, he might have been a college professor or even a haberdasher. But behind the alert eyes, exaggerated by his thick glasses, was a keen mind that had earned him a reputation as one of the finest agents for the world police organization, Interpol.

The man facing Lou across the width of his desk was an agent as well but a quite dissimilar one. Jerry Shannon was twelve years younger and the difference in age might have been guessed as twenty. His sandy-colored hair had a tendency to fall haphazardly over a ruddy forehead, thus outlining an almost annoyingly good-looking face. Innocent brown eyes belied his own shrewd intelligence, and the too-full-lipped mouth gave him a false air of softness that was far from the truth.

Jerry finished reading the report in his hands, and as he looked up at Lou the softness vanished from his face to be replaced by an intense hardness.

"Kidnapping," he said, tossing the report on Lou's desk. "And on a grand scale. Sounds pretty ugly."

"It is," Lou agreed, standing and stretching his arms over his head. "There's a postscript that hasn't yet been added to that report."

Jerry waited a moment for Lou to finish. When his senior officer remained silent Jerry prompted him. "Maybe the postscript will answer the question in my mind."

Lou lifted his eyes until they met Jerry's, and as usual the younger man was impressed by the hard bluntness of the other's gaze. "You mean, why are we being called into it? On the surface, it looks like a job for the FBI of course. They've been working on it, too. That's their report you just finished reading. They called us in, however, because one of the kidnapping victims just turned up."

To the casual observer Lou would have sounded perfectly calm and casual about the matter. Jerry recognized at once, however, the telltale signs that informed him Lou was anything but calm. Upton was furious, coldly angry about the information he was passing on.

"The victim was dead?" Jerry guessed aloud. Lou nodded. “All right,” Jerry went on, “so it's even uglier than that report indicates. But I still don't see where we come into the picture. Murder or no, it's still an FBI affair. All of the kidnap victims were Americans, right?"

"Right,” Lou agreed, “but the victim didn't turn up in America. His body was discovered in Morocco a week ago. They just identified him today."

Jerry suppressed an urge to shudder. Kidnapping, on the large, organized level that the report indicated, was nasty business to begin with. When you added murder and international implications it became even uglier.

"Okay,” he agreed, picking up the report again. “It looks like we're involved. Where do we start?"

The response pleased Upton, who smiled briefly. He liked a man who started to work at once without arguing a matter. “Did you get from the report?” he asked, indicating the all too thin stack of papers.

Jerry nodded. “I did, and they aren't very pretty ones. All of the kidnap victims have been young fellows in their teens. Judging from the photos I'd say they were good-looking, all-American types."

"Meaning?"

Jerry looked up again. “It's just a thought, but they're all the sort that would appeal to a pervert. There's the fact too that none of them were from wealthy families, the sort who could pay ransoms. In fact, there's nothing to indicate that ransoms have been demanded even though some of the kids have been missing for weeks."

"You're on the right track,” Lou informed him. “That one they found in Morocco—an autopsy revealed that he had been subjected to unnatural acts. Of course that might mean nothing. For all we know the kid might have been a little lavender himself."

"At his age?” Jerry was incredulous.

"It's possible. Homosexuals don't wait until they're twenty-one you

know to suddenly turn that way. Most of them know fairly early what they are."

Jerry scowled. “Still sounds to me like some filthy queer is at work here,” he insisted.

"Okay, I'm not arguing. It sounded to me like a possibility also. I just wanted to see if you thought the same thing."

Lou pulled a cigar from his pocket and lit it, puffing deeply until the tip was glowing red. “Knowing that,” he said finally, “Do you still want to handle the case?"

"You're damned right I do. This sort of thing really makes me sore."

"It might mean mixing with the ... uh ... gay set."

"As long as it accomplishes my objective that's fine with me,” Jerry insisted.

"In that case,” Lou said, reaching for the phone on his desk, “there's someone I want you to meet."

Jerry was puzzled by the curious smile that passed over Lou's features, as though he were briefly enjoying some private joke. But he didn't question it. Knowing Lou, the joke would be shared at the appropriate time and not before.

"You're sure this is the place?” Jerry looked doubtfully at the shabby front of the building before which they were standing. The first letter of the neon sign was not working, leaving it to read “—TEAM BATHS.” The building appeared to be in no better condition than the sign.

"Positive,” Lou assured him, leading the way to the entrance door. “What's the matter? Don't you have any regard for your health?"

"I was in one of these places just once, a long time ago,” Jerry argued although he followed his companion. “I probably just got the wrong one, but there were some pretty disgusting things going on. Needless to say I didn't stay around."

"Needless to say,” was all Lou said. They had approached a counter. An elderly figure in a dirty shirt turned around to greet them.

"Good even.., my God,” he said ignoring Lou while his eyes moved up

and down Jerry's flawless body, handsomely encased in slim-fitting trousers and a second-skin T-shirt an outfit that Lou had suggested.

"Anything wrong?" Jerry snapped, embarrassed by the examination and the hungry way in which the old man was smacking his lips.

"If there is it doesn't show," the man behind the counter remarked with a wink. Still smacking his lips, he reached behind himself and produced two wire baskets, each containing a large towel and a locker-type key on a string. "You can leave your valuables here," he explained in a more businesslike tone. "The key's for your locker inside. That'll be two bucks each, unless you want."

"He doesn't," Lou answered for Jerry without waiting to hear the rest of the suggestion. He led the way to the door that took them inside.

"I don't like this," Jerry grumbled in a low voice as he followed Lou. "This place looks to me to be as queer as that other one I was in."

"Can't help that," Lou argued. "Jack picked the meeting place."

"Who is this Jack anyway?" Jerry wanted to know.

"A top-notch agent, just the sort of guy you'll need on this case."

"One of your boys?"

"Nope." Lou had stubbornly refused to offer any information on the agent they were meeting.

"How will I know him when I see him?"

"He'll know you. Are you familiar with the popular song 'Strangers in the Night?"

"Sure, who isn't," Jerry answered. The song was one that had been high on the hit parade for weeks.

"He'll hum it. That's how you'll know him."

"Well I'll be..." Jerry swore suddenly. "Did you see that?"

"What?" Lou asked without even turning his head.

"That guy back there in that little room. He was playing with himself. And he smiled at me when we went past."

"Don't you like being smiled at?" Lou asked. They had reached a room lined with lockers. There were two other males in the room in the process of undressing and putting their clothes in lockers. Both looked up and Jerry again felt himself being mentally stripped of his clothes. With a sinking feeling he realized that he was going to have to do the same thing physically that they were doing mentally remove his clothes.

"Do I have to strip?" he asked helplessly, taking little comfort from the fact that Lou had already begun disrobing.

"You'd look pretty conspicuous running around in here with your clothes on," Lou reminded him, continuing to undress.

Reluctantly Jerry began stripping also. He had hoped that the other two would finish and leave before he got very far, but on the contrary, they were most definitely dawdling and were making no secret of their interest in his performance.

Cursing silently to himself, Jerry peeled the T-shirt over his head, the muscles rippling over his arms and back as he moved. His broad tanned chest gleamed in the stark light, smooth and velvet except for the faintest whisper of hair that could be detected near his breasts and another shadowy line that began at his navel and disappeared beneath his low-rise trousers.

He removed his loafers and socks slowly, painfully aware of the fact that he was being watched with renewed appreciation. Finally he loosened his trousers and with trembling hands pulled them down, stepping quickly out of them. He glanced once at Lou, pleading silently for a reprieve. Lou, however, was already stark naked, apparently quite at ease. Worse, there was no ignoring the fact that Lou was amused by his companion's embarrassment.

Blushing with anger and embarrassment, Jerry hooked his thumbs in the elastic of his shorts and pulled them viciously downward over his lean, catlike hips. There was an audible gasp from the audience across the locker room, and even Lou, Jerry noticed as he glanced that way, had raised an eyebrow in silent admiration.

Under other circumstances Jerry would have been flattered by the awe his naked body produced. He was intelligent enough to know that he was impressively endowed and, naked as he was now, as spectacular an example of male beauty as had ever been carved from marble or painted on canvas. He was not terribly tall, but his slightly

less than six-foot figure was perfect in proportion, not the muscle-bound overdeveloped sort but the lean sculptured ideal that had been praised by the ancients of Greece in their songs and writings. His broad shoulders and chest tapered to a slender waist and almost nonexistent hips. The shadow of hair from his navel led the eye downward over the flat, hard-as-rock surface, to bloom suddenly and luxuriantly about his splendid form. He turned to put his clothes in the waiting locker and displayed a sculptured back and voluptuous buttocks sharply in contrast to the hardness of the rest of his body. Even his legs were like twin columns of marble.

"Ready?" Lou asked, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Sure," Jerry said gruffly, closing the locker. He picked up his towel, debating briefly the possibility of wrapping it around his nude torso. Shaft them, he thought angrily, tossing it over his shoulder as Lou had done.

He half-expected one of his admirers to reach out for him as he passed and he made his hand into a fist. Lou or no Lou, he'd slug the first fag who laid a hand on him. His "fans," however, were content to drool as the two men passed.

"Where to now?" Jerry asked as they entered a long, dimly lit hall with damp, dirty walls. There were numerous doors opening off the hall. Some of them, Jerry noticed, were open, the room inside occupied by nude and watchful men. This was rapidly proving far worse than he had suspected.

"The steam room," Lou informed him. "It's dark in there by the way."

"Maybe I'll like that better," Jerry said. Lou only smiled.

The steam room was indeed dark. For a moment they were framed in the light of the doorway, and there was a low wolf whistle from inside as Jerry paused in the door. He was grateful as the door swung closed and left them in blackness.

Lou had taken his arm and was leading him. The seats were like bleachers, leading the way upward. As they went up they stepped around and, once, upon other people. Someone reached for Jerry once but he sidestepped quickly. Finally near the top Lou motioned for him to sit and they lowered themselves to the benchlike seats.

It was still too dark to see anything, but there were little sounds of movement and some other sounds that Jerry at first couldn't identify.

Then he heard someone choke slightly and cough and he knew what the sounds were. I hope, he thought glumly, that we don't have to wait here long.

He jumped as a hand rested upon his leg. “Look, Lou,” he started to whisper angrily.

"It isn't Lou,” a voice whispered back. That was fact, Jerry agreed. The small, perfumed figure who moved nearer and pressed against him was definitely not Lou, although he hadn't been aware that Lou had moved away. What's more, his new companion's hand had come back to his leg, destination obvious.

Jerry jumped again as the hand all too efficiently reached its goal. He grabbed the slender wrist in a vicious grip, pulling it away, and started to say something ugly. He caught the words in his throat as the figure beside him leaned even closer, so close that Jerry felt the warm breath on his cheek. The figure pressed against him in the dark was humming the song, “Strangers in the Night."

"Oh no,” Jerry thought in despair, releasing his grip on the small wrist. So stunned was he that he was hardly aware of the fact that his companion's hand had made its way immediately back to the spot it had sought out before. But there was no mistaking the song that was being hummed in Jerry's ear.

"Okay,” someone snapped from below, “will the glee club find somewhere else to practice."

"Not a bad idea,” the voice whispered in Jerry's ear. “Come on."

Numbly, Jerry did as suggested, allowing himself to be led back down to the floor. The door opened and he followed a short, slender form out of the room into the hall. Without even glancing back his guide led the way to one of the closed doors, opened it, and went inside. Jerry followed him, noticing with regret that the door was quickly closed and locked after him.

He forced himself finally to face the slight, effeminate blond who was in the small room with him, watching him with a broad smile.

"I'm going to hate myself for asking,” Jerry said, trying to ignore the smile and the admiring eyes that were going up and down his body, “but are you by any chance Jack?"

"Jackie,” his companion told him cheerfully, doing a neat little

curtsey. “Call me Jackie, Mr. Shannon."

Shaken, Jerry seated himself on the shabby cot that was the sole furnishing of the room. He instinctively moved away as Jackie seated himself on the cot beside him.

"Well, you don't expect me to stand while we talk,” Jackie remarked.

"Just keep your hands to yourself” Jerry snapped. “It's all right pretending, but you're getting too realistic."

"Pretending?” Jackie cocked one eyebrow. “I can assure you, darling, I was having a ball ... in a manner of speaking, that is."

Jerry shuddered. “You mean you're really...?” he faltered.

"Gay?” Jackie offered. “As a Christmas goose, Mr. Shannon Jerry, isn't it? I hate being formal."

"But you couldn't be not and work with Interpol."

"Someday I'll tell you some stories about some of your co-workers that would make that gorgeous hair of yours turn white. But as a matter of fact, no, I'm not with Interpol or any of your butch organizations. I'm from C.A.M.P."

"From what camp?"

Jackie giggled and rolled his eyes. “Heavens, you are virginal, aren't you? C.A.M.P. is an organization, pet, a homosexual organization dedicated to the protection and advancement of homosexuals throughout the world. I'm in the Special Services branch or, if you prefer, the police department."

"I think I'm beginning to see,” Jerry said, not at all happy with what he was seeing. “The case I've been assigned to looks like it might have a queer angle to *it."*

"And it takes one to know one,” Jackie said sarcastically. “Lou called and said he thought you might be able to use some help from our group."

Jerry was on the verge of declining that help, but there was a soft rap at the door, repeated after a second's pause. “That'll be Lou,” Jackie said, jumping up to unlock the door. His prediction was correct. Lou slipped quickly inside, careful to lock the door again after himself.

"Well, I see you've met," he said, glancing from one to the other.

"Yes, and I must say, it's one of the nicest presents anyone has ever brought me," Jackie quipped.

"I quit," Jerry said angrily, standing. The room, however, was too small for the three of them to stand comfortably. Jerry found himself with Jackie practically in his arms. At that realization he seated himself again.

"Like hell," Lou replied, and although he was still smiling his tone was one that permitted no argument. "You knew that there might be a homosexual element involved in this one and you specifically stated that you didn't mind working with the gay set."

"Men," Jackie sighed, clasping his hands over his heart, "fighting over me it's like a poem."

Jerry gave him a look that dripped venom which Jackie did not, to all appearances, notice. In fact, his tone when he spoke next was so different, so businesslike, that Jerry had to look again to be sure it was the same person.

"What's up, Lou?" Jackie asked. "You made it sound like a big one."

"Safe to talk here?" Lou whispered, glancing about the cubicle. Jackie nodded. "It looks just like the other rooms, but not even a stethoscope could pick up the conversation from in here and it would take a bazooka to get through the walls."

"I should have known better than to ask."

"All right," Jerry spoke up, making up his mind to get down to business and end the scene as quickly as possible. "How about filling me in? I'm in the dark about a few things."

"Even in the dark," Jackie commented, resorting to his more flippant tone, "you were heavenly. But fair is fair. I've already told you who I am, and if you have any doubts there's a perfectly stunning tattoo just under my left buttock."

Jerry ignored the evidence that was turned briefly toward him, almost in his face. "Can it," he snarled.

"Okay you two, end of the round," Lou interrupted the exchange. "We're here to work. I'll give it to you briefly, Jackie; Jerry can fill you

in on the details later."

Jerry started to protest, but Lou's look cut him short and he waited in silence for Lou to continue. “It's kidnapping, and from all the signs, a large, well-organized ring. The FBI has been handling it, but one of the kids turned up out of this country and dead. So they called on us and in turn called you."

Jackie had become sober again. “You said ‘kids,’ didn't you?"

Lou nodded. “All of them, more than two dozen already. All male, all in their teens. And the one who showed up dead was practicing homosexuality—maybe through no choice of his own."

Jerry was astonished by the look of cold fury that he saw on the homosexual's face. He had expected a flippant remark or at the most a lack of real concern, hut there was no mistaking the fact that the faggot in front of him was sore about the facts he had just heard.

"I'll take the case,” Jackie said sharply.

"There won't be any reward in this one,” Lou told him. “The families involved in this are uniformly poor."

As quickly as it had come the anger disappeared from Jackie's countenance, replaced once again by his sly, suggestive manner. He glanced down at Jerry, still splendidly nude. “If we all put our minds to it,” he quipped, “I'll bet we can think of some way to repay me for my efforts."

"Forget it,” Jerry snarled, trying without success to make himself less conspicuous. “I don't swing that route."

Jackie smiled and hummed a few bars from “It Seems To Me I've Heard That Song Before."

"Very funny,” Jerry said angrily. “You're pretty great with the humming aren't you?” At that Lou laughed aloud, adding to Jerry's annoyance. “What's so funny?” he demanded.

"Humming,” Jackie explained. “It's a specialty of mine, or haven't you ever tried a hum job?"

Jerry couldn't tell whether or not he was being put on. “Never heard of it,” he grumbled.

"You explain it, Lou," Jackie said.

Well," Lou began in a perfectly sober manner. "Have you ever really been kissed?"

Jerry blushed and looked down at the floor. "Only from a woman."

"Hair splitting," Jackie said.

"Anyway, it's similar," Lou went on, ignoring the side remarks, "except that the active partner adds music."

"Sounds crazy to me," Jerry said, still not sure if it was a joke.

"It is," Jackie assured him with a giggle. "My personal favorite is the *William Tell* Overture." At that Lou burst out laughing again, to Jerry's chagrin.

"Time for me to dash," Jackie said, as though they had been discussing business the entire time, "unless you want to finish what we started in the steam room."

"Get one thing straight," Jerry said in an even, cold voice. "That's finished and it won't be started again or you'll have another partner."

"I'll go to any lengths to have you for a partner," Jackie said with a smile. Without waiting for an answer he went on. "There's a bar near here, just around the corner in fact, called The Round Up. I'll meet you there in thirty minutes. If you're not sure you recognize me, try humming."

He was gone before Jerry could reply, unlocking the door and slipping out into the hall. Even angry as he was, Jerry was quick to notice that the frail effeminate appearance of the disappearing figure was deceptive. The slender body was hard as a rock, a well-cared for and perfectly coordinated specimen.

"Whew," he breathed with relief when Jackie was gone.

"He's quite a character," Lou agreed, "but don't be deceived. He's as sharp an operator as there is in the world."

"Maybe," Jerry agreed without enthusiasm, standing, "but I won't pretend he's one of my favorite people. By the way," he added, pausing as he reached for the door, "how do you know so much about that humming routine?"

Lou shrugged. “I've known Jackie for a long time,” was all he offered. Jerry decided against asking how long ... or how well.

"What happened to you in the steam baths?” he asked instead.

"Sure you want me to tell you?"

Jerry glanced quickly at Lou, but it was impossible to read the other man's expression. “Guess not,” he answered, opening the door into the hail.

There was only one person in the hall. Jerry's immediate reaction was one of suspicion. The huge, bull-like man was totally out of place in a fruity steam bath. Even at a glance it was easy to see he was not in any way homosexual but instead reeked rugged, he-man masculinity. The out-of-place factor was enough to arouse Jerry's suspicions.

They were quickly allayed, however, as the stranger nodded very slightly in Lou's direction. So he was one of Lou's boys, although he was one Jerry did not remember seeing before.

"Thank God for that,” Jerry found himself thinking. It was a relief to know that there was someone else in the place besides himself who was not a faggot.

"Good night, Rich,” Lou said to the stranger as they passed by him. Jerry was aware of the fact that Rich looked him over quickly—but at least he knew this one's interest in him wasn't sexual.

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Chapter 2

If Jerry had found Jackie rather hard to tolerate in the raw he was even more so clothed. Promptly thirty minutes after the separation at the steam baths Jerry entered the door of The Round Up bar, having left Lou at his car. Jackie, he observed, was not so prompt; there was no sign of him in the room.

The bar did not, at first sight, offer a very appealing picture. Not even the dimness of the lights, which left the interior in near darkness, could manage to lend any sort of charm to the battered counter or the stools with torn plastic hanging loose. The floor was covered with sawdust and debris of various sorts.

The customers, too, Jerry would have described as debris. Although he could not be expected to know it, some bars catering to homosexuals employ a certain discretion and that discretion is often imitated by the customers. Neither The Round Up nor its patrons could have been given credit for such thoughtfulness. The photos pinned to the wall, pictures of nearly nude young men, mostly bodybuilders, identified the bar for what it was, a gay hangout. The patrons were as easily identified.

Jackie, too, when he arrived some fifteen minutes later, would be easily identified as homosexual. His gleaming blond hair was as mussed as it had appeared before, and although it was night he wore sunglasses whose frame glimmered with jewels. To be sure he wore a black silk suit, but the impression was anything but conservative. The suit was cut extremely, the trousers fitting to his slim legs like leotards. His crimson ascot, the huge diamond flashing on his finger, the lace kerchief in his pocket, and the long, gold cigarette holder he carried added to the flamboyant picture.

Jackie came in Jerry's direction but stopped before he had reached the agent. He paused for a moment, glancing about as though looking over the prospects among the room's few occupants. Then he again started toward the rear. As he passed Jerry he winked and whispered, so low that Jerry wasn't even sure he had heard, “Look after me like you're interested, then follow me to the rest room."

Jerry did not like the idea of pretending to pick up a screaming faggot. But then, he reminded himself, that was exactly the same

impression he had created earlier in the steam baths. With a silent sigh he looked after Jackie. When the blond had passed through the door at the rear Jerry stood and walked in the same direction. He noticed one or two of the patrons smirking knowingly and felt an urge to punch them, but he controlled his temper.

The door at the rear opened onto a small hallway. The first door off of that was marked MEN and he entered to find Jackie standing at one of the fixtures.

"Hello, handsome," Jackie greeted him cheerfully. "Join me?"

"I can talk just as well from back here," Jerry informed him curtly.

"As a matter of fact, no you can't," Jackie answered. "Try the booth, the one marked out of order. I'll join you in a second."

"For what?"

"Don't be silly. No one ever lost their virtue in a john—at least not in this one."

Begrudgingly, Jerry did as instructed. A moment later Jackie, too, stepped into the booth. Without a word he lifted the lid from the commode and plunged his hand into the water. There was a whirring of gears and the wall slid open.

"Well I'll be damned," was all Jerry could say.

"No time to discuss your personal vices," Jackie said, stepping through the opening. Jerry followed the blond agent through it and found himself suddenly and unexpectedly in a spacious, artistically modern living room. Chandeliers glittered brightly overhead, candles cast flickering shadows on velvet-covered walls. Twin sofas flanked a fireplace in which a fire was burning.

Jerry stared about, astonished. "How did this get here?" he asked, dumbfounded.

"That's a long story. A third person entered the room from yet another door. "Hello, Rich," Jackie greeted the newcomer. "Do you two know each other?"

Jerry stared in disbelief. It was indeed Rich, the towering, all-male creature he had seen at the baths. "Don't tell me," Jerry gasped, "he's one of your kind."

Jackie's eyes widened. “Hardly. For one thing he's not blond. Drink?"

"Yes, please, a strong one.” Jerry sank into one of the sofas. Agents who weren't like agents, homosexuals who weren't like homosexuals—things were getting awfully mixed up.

While Jackie seated himself discreetly opposite Jerry, Rich poured the drinks and brought them over. Then he too took a seat, but off to himself, so that Jerry half-forgot the third man was present.

"You brought the report,” Jackie asked, businesslike once more.

Jerry handed it over wordlessly, fascinated by the lightning-like changes in the blond's personality. Which of them, he wondered, was the real Jackie—or were they all?

Jackie read rapidly, flicking the pages over. He lifted his eyes finally. “Not much to go on, is there?” he commented, handing the report to Rich, who had risen and come over to the sofa.

"Not much,” Jerry agreed, pleased that the atmosphere was remaining businesslike. “One small item that might or might not be a clue. We searched the homes of all of them. One of them, the last one, had a receipt in his room for some magazines. We checked it out. It came from one of those seedy movie arcade stores on Santa Monica, but there was nothing in the kid's room that could possibly have come from that store."

"Have you looked over the store closely?” Jackie asked, interested.

Jerry shook his head. “I told the boys to stay out of there until I had a chance to look it over myself. I didn't want to scare them away if it was a lead."

"Good thinking.” Jackie glanced at his watch. “If we go now we might be able to check it out yet this evening."

"Fine with me,” Jerry agreed, downing his drink. He preferred action, following up on leads, to sitting around talking.

"One small favor first,” Jackie stopped him. “How about changing your shoes?"

"How about what?"

"See what you can find for him, Rich,” Jackie addressed the thus far

silent partner. Rich glanced down at Jerry's feet, then left the room.

"What's all this about anyway?" Jerry demanded. “If you have any cute ideas about my donning glass slippers or the like, forget it."

"Don't strain your briefs,” Jackie told him. Rich returned bearing a pair of shoes that were little different from the ones Jerry was wearing. “Just put those on and I'll explain *it,* all right?"

Jerry didn't like being bossed around, but he seated himself again and donned the shoes as instructed. “All right, now what?” He wanted to know.

"Try walking in them,” Jackie instructed him.

Jerry stood and walked a few feet across the room. Jackie watched through the sunglasses. “That's fine,” he said, standing also. He joined Jerry and handed him the sunglasses he was wearing. “Here, take a look."

Puzzled, Jerry put on the glasses and glanced down. To the naked eye the shoes had left no trail. Looking through the sunglasses, however, he could see each step he had taken as though they were painted on the floor. “Pretty clever,” he admitted, handing the glasses back.

"But what makes you think that's necessary?"

"The rules of C.A.M.P.,” Jackie explained. “High Camp, that's our headquarters, insists on being able to keep track of everyone working on a job. Those tracks are also slightly radioactive to a very small degree of course. Only enough that you could he tracked even without these glasses. Shall we go now?"

Jerry was still not happy about working with or even being around a bunch of queers, but he could not help admitting to himself that C.A.M.P. had some pretty ingenious ideas.

They left through the rest room again, but in the hall outside Jackie led the way to a rear door and through that to a parking lot. “We'll take my car,” Jackie suggested.

The car proved to be as much a surprise as everything else connected with the blond homosexual. Shannon recognized it at once the square, upright grill flanked by staring headlights, the massive size of the gray convertible body, the runabout fenders even the locking hubcaps were trademarks.

"A Rolls," he said in surprise.

"1935," Jackie answered, pausing at the car. "Want to drive it?"

Shannon's resentment of working with Jackie was forgotten in his enthusiasm. "You bet," he said and was behind the wheel before Jackie had time to comment further.

For Shannon it was like a dream—in fact it was a dream, the sort he had enjoyed for years without ever suspecting that *it* would become a reality. The huge car, huge even beyond contemporary standards, drove with the agility of a sports car.

"It's fast, too," he commented on the performance.

"Rolls never claimed more than ninety-three, but this one will do a little better than a hundred," Jackie explained. "It's the high-lift camshaft, which they eliminated eventually because it was faintly audible. The real fascination though is the power, the sheer torque. Slow it down, way down."

Shannon did as told. The car slowed almost to a crawl without any necessity for shifting down. "We're only doing four miles per hour," he exclaimed, hard-pressed to believe that a car without automatic transmission could move that slowly without shifting or stalling. He accelerated hard and, again without any sign of displeasure, the car speeded up smoothly. "Pardon me for saying so," he commented finally, "but this is hardly the sort of car I'd expect you to drive."

"Meaning homosexuals aren't supposed to be attracted to things mechanical?" The tone was only slightly sarcastic. "Your knowledge of homosexuals, I suspect, is mostly rubbish. I know dozens of gay people who are as fascinated by cars as I am or boats or airplanes. You probably think of homosexuals in terms of hairdressers or dancers, but did you know the jobs of policemen and firemen appeal to the feminine nature fascination, I'm told, with uniforms."

"I'm afraid it's a field I haven't investigated," Shannon said after a silence, also slightly sarcastic.

"Pity. In our field of work, knowledge of people is generally considered essential."

The conversation was ended by the fact that they were nearing their destination. They were already on Santa Monica Boulevard driving through the West Hollywood area that was commonly known as the

Tenderloin district. Here, as insiders were fully aware, anything and everything was available for the right price. Handsome, tough-looking young men paraded the streets or posed at street corners and other strategic locations, watching for customers. There were women too, some of them looking as though they had just left a chic cocktail party in a better section of the city. The streets were lined with shops, pool halls, and movie arcades that were, as often as not, fronts for other forms of business.

Shannon turned onto a side street and, after a little searching, found a parking place that would accommodate the ultra-long car.

"Look," Jackie said as they walked back to the boulevard, "let's not give them a scare just yet. Why don't you hang around here on the street and let me go in first and have a look?"

"Why you?"

"Because it's possible they might suspect you of being a cop. They rarely put me in that category."

Shannon didn't like the idea, but he knew as well that Jackie was right. He would have preferred the action himself but he gave in. "On one condition," he said firmly. "You're only looking the joint over. If there's anything to see or any action, you whistle for me."

"I'll hum loudly," Jackie assured him with a smile. He waved his hand and started across the street. The movie arcade which was his destination was only a few doors down from the intersection.

As Jackie glanced in the direction of the arcade he caught sight of a young man who paused at the door, glanced at a paper in his hand as though to confirm the address, and then entered the narrow doorway. Jackie frowned to himself the kid was too young to be going into the arcade where a sign over the door insisted YOU MUST BE 21 TO ENTER. And the arcade had already been linked, if tenuously, with the disappearance of one young man. Jackie quickened his step.

He got as far as the door without incident. His way into the arcade, however, he was blocked by the appearance of a tall, seedy-looking individual who stepped into the doorway.

"Sorry," he said gruffly, "we're closed for the night."

Jackie hesitated, his thoughts on the young man who had entered the shop just before him. "I just wanted to look for a book to read "he

commented.

"Got no books," the man informed him, although the sign over the door advertised books and magazines as well as films. "Try across the street."

The situation, Jackie thought, was becoming increasingly suspicious. He remembered, however, his promise to Jerry. To insist upon going in would only stir up trouble and he had promised he would only look things over quietly. He shrugged as though it were of little importance. "Guess I'll check across the street," he agreed and turned away to retrace his steps.

Shannon had lingered across the street near the corner. "I saw," he commented as Jackie walked up. "He didn't want you going in. The question is why?"

"He didn't stop the customer who went in just before me," Jackie said. "The young kid. I don't like it at all."

"I don't either," Shannon agreed. "More than ever, I want to get inside that place—and right now."

"Then let's," Jackie decided. "We can still do it quietly with any luck."

"I don't know," Shannon said, although he fell into step with Jackie, back toward the arcade. "That guy's sure to put up a stink before we can quiet him down."

"Maybe not," Jackie commented. He had taken his cigarette holder from his pocket and as Shannon watched he twisted one end of it slightly.

"Don't tell me, let me guess—it's a wand."

"Very funny. As a matter of fact it's a blowgun."

"A blowgun?"

"Appropriate, don't you think?"

Shannon grunted. "Next thing you'll be showing me a hum-gun."

"Hadn't thought of that," Jackie said as they reached the door of the arcade.

The guard had temporarily abandoned his post. They got just inside

the door before he saw them and started angrily across the small room toward them.

"I thought I told you..." That was as far as he got with the argument. Jackie had lifted the cigarette holder to his lips as they entered. There was no sound, but the tiny dart inside had been fired and found its mark. As Shannon watched the man staggered and fell at their feet.

"Only a narcotic, but a powerful one," Jackie explained in a low voice. "It'll keep him cold for maybe five minutes, which should give us enough time."

"The kid who came in," Shannon said, "will you know him if you see him?"

The arcade consisted of a series of booths, each containing a coin-operated viewer at which customers could view allegedly erotic films. Each booth was afforded a measure of privacy by a curtain pulled across the opening. There was nothing they could do but check each booth.

The first contained a gentleman who had obviously found the films stimulating and had chosen to do something about it. "Excuse me," Jackie apologized with a nod. "Please continue." "That's savoir faire," he commented to Shannon as he closed the drapes. He did continue.

Shannon expressed his distaste for the job by allowing Jackie to open the curtains of the booths and check the activity within. One or two of the booths were empty; a few were occupied much as the first had been. There were two fellows in one of the booths. Jackie looked just long enough to see that neither of them was the boy he was looking for—and to regret that he was busy—it looked like an interesting party.

He had all but decided that the search was useless as they approached the last of the booths until he heard the sound of voices. There was more than one man in this booth, and if they were talking they weren't occupied in the same manner as the others.

"The one from Tijuana..." was all he heard and then the voice faded away. With a grim nod to Shannon, Jackie pulled the curtain slightly aside.

This booth was considerably different from the others. For one thing there wasn't even a viewer, only a door into another room, a door that was just swinging closed.

Without hesitation Jackie put his foot in the door. “This may be it,” he whispered. Shannon, he observed, had reached a similar conclusion he had already drawn a gun.

The door led them into a large room behind the arcade. They had a glimpse of another door closing on the opposite wall. The two men just leaving were carrying a limp body between them.

The departure, however, did not leave the room empty. There were still three dangerous-looking hoods present, one of them with a gun in his hand, and the look they shot Jackie and Shannon was anything but welcoming.

"The lights,” someone called, and before Jackie could stop him one of them had dived for a switch and the room was in darkness. Jackie dived for the door as Shannon fired from close behind him. There was another shot and a groan.

"One down,” Jackie thought grimly. He listened for sounds of movement, straining his ears to locate the two adversaries in the room. Shannon shot again and again his bullet found its mark.

"Keep one of them alive,” Jackie hissed. Dead men weren't going to give them any information, and that was what he wanted.

The third man proved to be cleverer than the other two. While everyone else had been shooting it out he had managed to make his way around the room, behind Shannon and Jackie. There was a burst of light as the door opened into the arcade and as quickly closed after him, leaving Jackie and Shannon again in the blackness.

"Where the hell are those lights?” Shannon shouted angrily.

"I think I can find the switch,” Jackie answered. “Just do me a favor and take your finger off that trigger."

He stood and made his way cautiously to where he remembered the switch to be. After a moment's fumbling he found it and the lights came on again. While Shannon looked for the switch to the door, Jackie knelt and checked the two men who had been shot. “Dead,” he announced, fighting down his disappointment. He rose and went to the back door that led out of the room. It opened into an alley that was, by this time, empty.

Shannon had found the switch finally to the first door. The two of them went back through the dummy booth into the arcade, where

pandemonium reigned. The customers were arguing with one another and trying to get out of the place as quickly as possible, some of p1 them still not fully clothed. Only the couple, Jackie noticed as he passed their booth, seemed oblivious to the uproar. They were still occupied with each other.

The man in the front room wasn't going to do them any good either. The escaping thug had seen to that, with a bullet in the forehead. In the distance Jackie heard the wail of a police siren.

"We'd better clear out of here," he said, heading for the door. With Shannon at his heels he darted to the street, dashing through the evening traffic to the opposite side.

They had found some action, he was thinking as they ran in the direction of the car, and they had confirmed the fact that the movie arcade was a lead. But it was a lead they had lost as quickly as they had found it. It certainly wouldn't be used by the kidnappers again.

Worse, the kidnappers had successfully added another trophy to their collection. The limp figure the two men had been carrying out the back door had been the teenager Jackie had seen entering the arcade.

Jackie drove, the two of them silent as the night raced by the Rolls. He headed into a quiet residential neighborhood, turning sharply and suddenly into a drive. Shannon saw a wall of concrete and steel in front of them, but before he could yell the wall had slid open, permitting them entrance into the basement garage.

"Remote control," he commented as Jackie steered the car into a stall. "Pretty neat." As they emerged from the car he noticed that the garage was lined with stalls similar to the one in which the Rolls was parked. "More cars?"

"Um-hum, they're a hobby." Jackie led the way across the garage, to a key-operated elevator.

"You must have a lot of money," Shannon commented. The elevator wooshed them upward at a terrific speed.

"I do," Jackie said simply.

"Where are we anyway?"

"Home." The elevator came to an abrupt stop and opened into a luxurious vestibule, somewhat fussy in decor.

"I thought that other place was your home."

"Oh, no, that's just one of the offices for C.A.M.P.," Jackie explained as he led the way into the living room of the apartment. There was a flurry of movement and a miniature white poodle bounded across the room toward them, pink bows flopping.

"Watch it," Jackie said as Shannon half-stooped to pet the dog. Jackie pulled his hand back and swept the dog up into his own arms. "She's trained to kill," he explained to Shannon, calming the snarling dog by rubbing her belly. "Those teeth could rip your arm off."

"That harmless little creature?"

"We only look harmless," Jackie told him.

While Shannon somewhat hesitantly held out his hand for the dog sniff, Jackie talked to the dog. "Good girl, Sophie, he's a friend."

Sophie seemed satisfied finally and Jackie deposited her again on the floor. The dog once more approached Shannon, this time with her tail wagging. Cautiously Shannon patted the dog's head.

"It's all right now," Jackie assured him. "She'll remember that you're a friend. How about a drink?"

"Love one."

While Jackie left the room to fetch the drinks Shannon again looked about the apartment, his attention resting on one particular item. Placed in a position of honor atop the credenza, the woodcarving represented a specific portion of the male anatomy and stood nearly two feet tall.

"Like it?" Jackie asked as he returned with the drinks on a tray.

"Well, it's different. What are all these scratches up and down the sides?"

"Notches, if you must know."

Shannon took the drink Jackie offered him. His host, judging from the number of notches, was obviously a very busy person. They seated themselves on the sofa. "Looks like we're back where we started," Shannon said in a discouraged voice.

"Not quite. I overheard just a fragment of conversation back at the

movie arcade, but one of those hoods mentioned Tijuana. It might mean nothing or it might be a lead. In any case, I think tomorrow we should make a trip south of the border, just to see what we can find."

"Good idea," Shannon agreed. He sipped his drink thoughtfully for a moment. "This outfit you work for it must be pretty large."

"It is. Even I don't know exactly how large. There are branches working in the fields of politics and law, either trying to get the laws changed or giving legal assistance to those who are already in trouble. Other branches work in the arts, trying to enrich the homosexual's life, and still others work in medicine and psychiatry. As you know already, I work in the police branch. My job is simply to protect homosexuals throughout the world in whatever way I can."

"How did you ever become involved in all this?" He didn't add that, Jackie still seemed to him a highly unlikely source of protection.

Jackie considered the question for a moment. "It started for me a long time ago, when I was just a kid and I won't say how long ago either. I had a terrific crush on an older guy. He didn't know I was even around, I'm sorry to say, and I didn't have the vaguest inkling that he was even homosexual. But he was, and there were others who knew about it. One of the others was blackmailing him. Without knowing why, I watched my hero disintegrate, from a man who had everything into a neurotic, irritable, heavily drinking wreck. He killed himself finally."

"Why didn't he go to the police?"

"The man who was blackmailing him was a policeman." Jackie paused to let this have its effect. "Anyway, after his death a stranger came around one day and asked me all about this hero of mine. At first I thought he was with the police, but eventually, when he was convinced that I was gay and sincerely upset over the incident, he explained that he was from C.A.M.P. It was a new group then, just getting started, but it sounded interesting to me. I was due to inherit a fortune from my family and I decided to use it doing something worthwhile for other unfortunate people like my hero. So here I am."

Shannon was thoughtful when the story had ended. He still didn't like the queers or working with one, but he could see that such people were in an unfortunate and vulnerable position, and in that sense he could actually admire Jackie and the organization for which he worked.

Jackie broke the silence. “You'd better stay here,” he said, standing. “Don't worry, there won't be any funny business. Your room has a strong lock on the door."

Shannon said nothing as he followed Jackie, hut he was grateful for the assurance. He had half-expected a pass and he would have had to make his feelings on that subject forcibly clear.

Alone in the room that Jackie had provided for him, with the door securely locked, Shannon undressed slowly and thoughtfully in front of the mirror. He glanced at the bed, turned down invitingly. Too bad, he thought, he would have to sleep alone. He was admittedly oversexed, very much so. Once a day was the minimum activity that would allow him to remain comfortable. But of course he was interested only in girls. He'd rather suffer without any relief than fool around with a guy. Suffer without or ... he looked at his nude reflection in the mirror, enjoying without conceit his own masculine perfection.

What the hell? He thought, his hand sliding down over his abdomen to clasp himself, it wasn't the first time.

On the other side of the mirror Jackie smiled wistfully as he watched Shannon's hand begin to move, slowly at first and then more rapidly. Such a beautiful specimen, he thought. And such a waste, he added as Shannon bit his lip, his body convulsing in the throes of self-release.

"Ah, well,” Jackie told himself as he prepared for bed, now that Shannon had finished in the other room. He had met Shannon's type before, the type who swore they would never have anything to do with queens. He reminded himself with a grin, as he pulled the sheets up over his body, that the trophy in the other room sported several notches that represented exactly the same type.

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Chapter 3

The trip from Los Angeles to Tijuana was like traveling from one world to another. Los Angeles was bright with sunshine and brilliant colors; everywhere one saw wide streets, handsome people, spectacular buildings. In Tijuana everything was dirt, dirt streets, dirty buildings and cars, even dirty people. The town had little charm, only the scent and sounds of vice and poverty, the twins who ruled the border town.

"Well, now that we're here, what exactly do you suggest?" Shannon asked as the two of them strolled down one of the main streets. It was dusk and the sidewalks were filled with people of two sorts. There were the visitors, among them many servicemen from nearby San Diego, and there were the local people, most of them busy at work hustling the visitors. Cabdrivers tried to sell everything from dirty pictures to their virginal sisters. Doormen at the various bars exhorted the visitors to enter, sometimes practically dragging them through the doors by their most convenient handles. Shopkeepers extolled the virtues of their wares, more often than not mere junk.

"The only thing I can suggest is keeping our eyes and ears open," Jackie answered. "I think I should check out one or two places on my own—local hangouts for some of the gay set. Why don't we split up? You check out a few spots, and we'll meet later."

"Suits me." Shannon was slightly less than comfortable with the blond agent, who was as flamboyantly dressed and as conspicuously homosexual as ever. He was aware of the looks, sometimes accompanied by sneers, sometimes by suggestive winks, that they were getting.

They agreed to meet at a small eatery called the Green Note at eleven and parted. Jackie headed straight for another small bar on one of the side streets, one that he knew was frequented by homosexuals who visited the town and local youths who tried to sell the visitors their time and talent.

The bar was not particularly crowded. Jackie ordered a beer and surveyed the room. It was difficult to know what to look for. If there was a connection between the kidnapping of American youths and the reference he had heard to Tijuana, surely someone in the town,

particularly someone who frequented this bar, should be able to shed some light. But it was hardly the sort of thing one brought up in a conversation with a stranger. He would have to feel his way cautiously and he would first have to meet one of the locals.

The latter problem was solved for him by a voice nearby. “Hello, sexy American,” someone greeted him.

Jackie turned to face the speaker, a young man who had come to stand practically at his elbow. What he saw was an almost breathtakingly handsome face. The hair was jet black and curly; beneath that was a deeply tanned face. The eyes seemed as black as the hair, glimmering flirtatiously. The cheekbones were high and beautifully molded. The full, shockingly red lips were parted now to reveal flashing white teeth.

"Waiting for someone?” the newcomer asked when Jackie remained silent.

"I've just found him, I hope,” Jackie answered with a ready grin. “How about joining me for a drink?"

"Sure.” His new friend took the seat beside Jackie at the bar. His white shirt was unbuttoned to the waist, revealing a bronze chest that gleamed as though it were polished. Tight faded jeans were stretched across firm hips and thighs, doing little to conceal the splendid bulge at his lap.

"I'm Jorge,” the young man said when the barmaid had brought their drinks.

"I'm Jackie."

"You think I'm nice, yes?” He raised his glass in a silent toast before taking a healthy swallow.

"I think you're perfect, yes,” Jackie answered. Sometimes work managed to combine itself with pleasure. This, he decided as Jorge's knee pressed against his own, was one of those times.

Jorge had finished his drink in one more healthy swallow.

"Want I another?” Jackie asked.

"We can have it sent to the back room,” Jorge told him with a grin, stood

"What's in the back?" Jackie asked, although he knew the answer already. He had seen the back room on one or two other occasions.

"Just a room where we can be alone, yes?" Jorge's entire leg was pressed against Jackie's now, moving gently but coaxingly.

For an answer Jackie dropped a hand to the bulge in the faded Levi's and squeezed gently. It wasn't really taking time off from work, he told himself as he stood. After all, the handsome young man might be able to give him all sorts of information some of it might even pertain to the case. It took only a moment of whispered conversation with the barmaid and a ten-dollar bill to gain them entrance to the back room. As a trysting place it was none too romantic just one large bed with a sheet over it—but what the room lacked in appeal Jorge more than made up for. As he undressed, Jackie watched the dark youth remove his own clothes, quickly and without shyness. He had the body of a jungle cat slim, powerful, tawny in color. His every move was an invitation to sex and Jackie was more than happy to accept the invitation.

But he did not forget his purpose in being here. He was slower at removing his clothes. Jorge, magnificently naked, sprawled across the bed waiting for him.

"Lots of Americans in town," Jackie commented, seating himself on the edge of the bed to remove his shoes.

"Not as nice as you," Jorge argued. It was a winning argument, but Jackie persevered.

"Do you see many young American fellows here?" he asked.

Jorge looked hurt by the question. "You like the younger types? I have a brother, maybe you would like him better?"

Jackie tossed his stockings aside and turned to feast his eyes on the treasure waiting for him. His eyes turned upward over the legs to the point where they joined the torso, providing Jackie an unobstructed view. For the moment that was as far as his eyes got.

"I don't think so," he answered the question, pleased by the smile that flashed over Jorge's face again. The questioning, he decided as he stood and reached for the light cord, might better wait for later.

Strong arms were waiting for him to crush him in a savage embrace. The meeting of their bodies was like an electric shock. Jorge was

ready for him, already aflame with desire, and Jackie's body was quick to match its state of arousal. It was contagious, the Latin passion that could be felt surging through the taut body pressed against his. Jackie's hands traced their way over the lean back, the buttocks soft with silken hair. Jorge was shivering with the intensity of his ardor. Jackie offered no protest as he was turned over, his face buried in the pillow. He groaned, more with pleasure than with pain, as he felt the first impatient prod of love.

"I hurt you?" Jorge asked, forcing himself still although the tone of his voice made the question a plea to continue.

For an answer Jackie thrust back and up with his hips, welcoming the Mexican. It was all the encouragement his lover needed. The action unleashed a volcano of passion. Jorge gorged himself with willing flesh. His hips thrashed and writhed ecstatically, his hands clawing at Jackie's soft skin.

Jackie moved with him, caught up in the frenzy that was sheer, unadulterated sex. His own moans blended with Jorge's as the frantic lover raced to an almost immediate peak.

It was not an end, however, to his passion. There was little more than a pause and then he had begun again, and this time his arm encircled Jackie, his hand seeking.

"You like me?" he hissed in Jackie's ear, following the question with a bite into Jackie's ear lobe.

"Like crazy," Jackie gasped. What a way to look for clues!

* * * *

The breasts did it. Shannon had intended some time ago to put on his clothes and call it quits. After all, he had told himself, three times wasn't enough to drain him altogether, but he should be feeling reasonably satisfied.

But she was still reclining on the bed, that luscious, fiery señorita he had picked up in the bar. She was still naked; and they were still the biggest, most delicious breasts he had seen in a long time. He had to bend down one last time, to bury his face in them.

"Again?" she asked brightly, wriggling her buttocks.

Shannon laughed and gave her fanny a hard slap as she rose from the

bed. “Sorry, *cara mia,* but I should have been out of here twenty minutes ago.” It was already five minutes of eleven; he was going to be late meeting Jackie. But then, sometimes delays were unavoidable.

Jackie himself, however, was just as late. At the same precise moment he was just zipping up his trousers.

"No more?” Jorge asked him sadly from the bed.

Jackie shook his head regretfully. “I wish I could, but I'm late. Maybe next time."

He took a twenty out of his billfold and tucked it into the pocket of Jorge's shirt, still hanging on the doorknob. Blowing his handsome friend a kiss, he slipped out of the door, then passed through the bar in front and out to the street.

Sexually his time had been ideally spent. From the standpoint of sleuthing, however, he had been less successful. Although he had managed to persuade his Latin lover to take a few breaks and talk while they were resting, he had come up with absolutely nothing in the way of leads. His conscience was bothering him slightly for spending as much time in bed as he had.

He had nearly reached the café at which he was to meet Shannon, walking quickly because of the lateness, when a cabdriver approached him. It was not an unusual approach, not in Tijuana.

"Hey, señor,” the fat stranger addressed him, motioning toward the open door of his taxi. “You wanna have some real fun? I know where the good places are."

"No thanks,” Jackie told him mechanically, starting to step around the man, who had placed himself directly in Jackie's path.

"Better take the taxi, señor,” another voice said from behind, and Jackie felt the unmistakable jab of a gun in the small of his back. Two other men had stepped up behind him.

Jackie glanced down the street. He was only a few doors from his meeting place with Shannon but there wasn't much chance of getting Shannon's attention. Ah well, he told himself as he obeyed the order and moved toward the open door of the taxi, he had wanted a lead. Somehow it seemed as though he might have found one.

Shannon was no more than thirty feet away when he recognized

Jackie climbing into the taxi. Not until the second man had started to get inside also did Shannon see the gun. His reaction was fast but not fast enough. He had sprinted less than half the distance when the cab pulled hurriedly away.

"Damn," he swore aloud. He turned and dashed across the street, in the direction of the taxi there.

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Chapter 4

The taxi carried them through the busy nighttime streets of the border town. Jackie tried to watch their direction without making his efforts conspicuous. They had ridden perhaps ten minutes, turning into a dark alley like street, when they stopped in front of a large ramshackle house, more suited architecturally to Cape Code than to Mexico. Jackie was ushered out of the car to the rambling front porch and quickly inside.

"This way," one of his guards said, indicating a door that led from the hall into what was apparently the parlor.

It did not take much imagination on Jackie's part to recognize the place as a bawdy house. He also knew that the houses in Mexico, as in most places of the world, were frequently centers for other activities as well, ranging from small-scale vice to large-scale crime.

He entered the room that had been indicated and stopped short in his tracks, scarcely able to believe his eyes.

"Jackie!"

"Rosarita Beech!" There was no mistaking the identity of his host or rather hostess, for the one-time female impersonator had once gained for himself some notoriety by paying a visit to Denmark. He had gone, as he had been quoted by the press, "an old man" he had come back "a new woman."

That, of course, had been quite a few years in the past. There was little left of the once ravishing beauty, now a gaunt, spindly creature with eyes and mouth too large for her face, arms too long for her body, and hands too large for her arms. Even her clothes were outdated and worn out. The lace that she wore over her head fell limply and raggedly about her shoulders, the red of her ruffled dress was faded to a dirty pink. Yet there was still something about her that was compelling and exciting, something that seemed to say she was not yet finished.

In his surprise at seeing his friend of old Jackie had forgotten his armed companions and the manner in which he had been brought here. Now he suddenly remembered.

"What's the big idea?" he demanded, indicating the goons. "Didn't anyone tell you, you can't get a man with a gun?"

"To be honest, love, that's about the only way I can get one these days," Rosarita answered, sweeping across the room to wave her hand grandly in the faces of the hoods, who quickly fled the room. "But I didn't intend for them to use one on an old sister. I hope they didn't hurt you."

"Only my nerves," Jackie assured her. "To be honest I thought I had stumbled onto something much more sinister. I was all prepared to fight my way back out of here."

The gaudily painted eyes looked him up and down. "Hmm, now that you mention it, you might yet have to. I do believe you're more stunning every time I see you." She didn't allow him any opportunity to answer, speaking in an almost continual stream of words. "First, some sherry for you, positively reeking of Spanish Fly oh, my dear, you wouldn't believe some of the Spanish flies I've had in my life—and then we're going to talk seriously always a chore for me, if you remember."

Jackie did remember, but he offered no protest as she thrust the sherry into his hand and fairly dragged him to a sagging divan. "Well, you can start by telling me how you knew I was in town," he said while she was pausing for breath.

She guffawed at that, flinging her head back and lifting her feet off the floor. "Oh, you ought to remember I never miss a trick that's the story of my life in a nutshell. There isn't a damned thing goes on in this town I don't hear about, usually before it happens. One of my spies actually the whole town's on my payroll—came flitting in here to tell me about a wild blond who had just crossed the border with a handsome man in tow—by the way, what did you do with him? No, never mind, you probably killed him with that sex drive of yours and left his body in an alley; not, I pray, near here or I'll have to buy off the local constabulary tomorrow—again."

"So you sent your boys to fetch me and bring me here. Now the question is, was this just to see an old friend or did you have something on your mind?"

"Merciful heavens, the things I've got on my mind would make Fanny Hill enter a convent. But seriously now, enough of your humor. I did have a reason."

Jackie waited patiently for her to explain, surprised to see that she actually had grown sober for a minute.

"I've been working this house for years now," she explained. "I came down here for a visit and when I saw all of the lovely young American servicemen tripping around I decided to go into the business. Patriotic Nell, that's what they always called me—I was a Victory girl, you know, with gardens and all. I hoed from one coast to the other during the war."

Jackie's own recollection was that Rosarita's war efforts had consisted of running pretty much the same sort of businesses from one coast to the other; and her employees had been known as Victory Darlings, more for the initials than as a tribute to their patriotism. But he did not interrupt.

Rosarita's expression and tone was one of wistful reminiscence. She was almost talking more to herself than to Jackie as she thought back over the years. "It's been good for me down here, south of the border. Of course my friends were always telling me to go down, but I had to find out for myself. Anyway, where was I oh, yes. Well, there was this man—a perfect angel I can tell you that. How I loved that s.o.b. Almost gave up the business for him, but one of us had to work and God knows he wasn't about to. Worse yet, he had a family."

"A family?" Jackie prompted. "You mean a real one?"

Rosarita sniffed as though her honesty were being questioned. "As real as anything else in this fairy world. Two heavenly little boys. Seems his wife just ran off and left the lot of them, so of course he brought them to me. Told me I was the reason his wife ran off, so I owed it to him to help with the kids. But I didn't mind, they were little sweethearts. That ape didn't even know what their names were."

"Sounds like a charmer."

"Well, he was; that's a fact. But to make a story short, he decided after a little while to imitate his wife and there I was with two children to raise."

At that Jackie had to raise his eyebrows. The image of Rosarita Beech as a mother was a hard one to envision. "You kept them?" he asked, trying not to sound dubious.

"Raised them as my own," she declared proudly. "Which they were, in a sense. And trained them everything I know or almost everything.

You honestly wouldn't believe what treasures they've proven to be. The oldest one, he's seventeen now, could pleasure a man more in five minutes than most of your common hustlers could in a month."

A warning bell sounded in the back of Jackie's mind and he began putting the pieces together. “You said, ‘could,’ didn't you?"

His hostess raised a handkerchief to dab at her eyes. With anyone else the gesture might have seemed artificial. But he knew her well enough to know that the sadness she revealed, ever so briefly, was genuine. “That's why I wanted to see you, darling, I need your help. Something's happened to him."

Jackie's interest quickened. He had suspected that the evening was only a diversion, unconnected with the case upon which he was working. It was beginning to look, however, as though the two affairs might be closely related.

"What do you mean, something's happened to him?"

"He's gone, that's what I mean.” She was practically wailing as she made the statement.

"Maybe he just ran away. It sounds cruel, but young men at that age frequently feel the urge to get out on their own."

Her eyes flashed angrily at the suggestion. “Not my Ramon, I can tell you that. It may be hard to believe, old bag that I am, but that little stallion loved me just like I was his mother."

Jackie regretted having made the suggestion. “It's not hard to believe at all,” he said soothingly, patting one gnarled hand. “I shouldn't have said it at all."

She accepted the apology with a wan smile. “Anyway, he was going to be out on his own in a few weeks. I gave him some money for his birthday, just for that purpose, so he could do some traveling, see the world a bit. No, he didn't run away."

"Do you think he was kidnapped?"

"That's the damnedest part. I was convinced of it and I was ready to pay any price they asked. You may not believe this, but I've got more jewelry stashed away in this house than they have at Tiffany's. Always kept my money in diamonds, you know. But the silly thing is, no one's contacted me. Not a word about ransom."

"I see.” From all appearances, it seemed that Rosarita's young Ramon had been a victim of the same kidnapping ring that Jackie was already trying to track down.

"Oh, that's not all.” Rosarita stood and went to a battered desk against one wall, rummaging through the contents to produce an envelope. “He's been gone over a month now without a trace. Then, just a couple of days ago, these showed up."

She handed Jackie the contents of the envelope. They were pictures, the sort of lurid sets available for purchase in most bawdy houses, although sets such as these, showing two males, were less frequently found. The twelve shots were close-ups, showing the face of only one partner and the anatomy of the other.

"Nice photography,” he commented, thumbing through the photographs. “But I don't see..."

"It's him,” she declared, pointing a painted finger at the faceless torso. ‘I'd know that prize winner anywhere."

Jackie stared again at the pictures, somewhat dubiously. “Are you really positive? It's hard to tell...."

She snorted loudly. “That's him all right, and there isn't a customer of the house that couldn't swear to the same thing. Prettiest thing they've ever had working this town, that's a fact."

"Where did they come from?” If she was convinced that the photos depicted the missing Ramon he was willing to accept it as fact.

"Some old bat passing through town on her way to Mexico City. I sent my boys after her but she gave us the slip along the way."

Jackie scowled thoughtfully. If the identification were correct then the kidnappings were beginning to make sense, if not very pleasantly.

"You think he was taken, then, to supply items of this sort,” he said aloud, “and probably to work in a house somewhere."

"That's what it sounds like to me, and an awful thing it is, too. He's a good boy, Jackie, he's never turned a customer except in this house. Imagine how degrading it must be for a nice kid like that."

Jackie was thinking, however, of the other young men who had been kidnapped—young men without any experience in prostitution

whatever or in homosexuality—the old white slave racket but with a queer twist.

"May I keep these?" he asked, indicating the pictures.

Her face was bright with relief. "Then you'll find him for me?"

"I'm going to try," he told her, thrusting the pictures into his pocket. This was one case he was going to solve at any costs. "Can you give me any other leads? What about his friends, his interests, his personal possessions?"

"His friends won't do you a bit of good. He was mostly a loner, and anyway, I've already talked to the few friends he had—strung one of them up by the thumbs, if you want to know, but he didn't know a damned thing."

"What about his room, then?" He didn't for a moment imagine that she was exaggerating.

"I'll show you that. Anyway, I want to show you something else."

She walked over to the hall door and poked her head out. "Pepe," she yelled at the top of her healthy lungs. "Get your tail in here, pronto!"

In his anger Jackie had forgotten that there had been two boys in her story. Pepe, then, was obviously the other one, the younger of the two.

A moment later a young boy of maybe fourteen came, somewhat shyly, in to the room, standing beside his "mother," who proudly rested a hand upon his thin shoulder. "This is the baby," she declared, beaming. "Pepe ie Coco."

Jackie rose to shake the offered hand. "But he looks American," he said, studying the boy. The youngster did indeed look American, with pale blond hair and wide blue eyes. There were even freckles that enhanced his upturned nose.

"They both are," Rosarita explained. "At least their father was. But you couldn't expect me to raise them as my own without giving them Spanish names."

"I see." Jackie had detected, behind the seemingly innocent eyes, a flicker of shrewdness, a quick sizing up. The smile that followed, however, assured him that he had passed the inspection.

"Handsome," Pepe declared, smiling up at his mother.

Rosarita laughed loudly. "Only fourteen and already a wizard at sizing up a trick. I think the two of you are going to get along fine."

"Get along?" Jackie was puzzled, although Pepe only continued to smile.

"I figured you'd need some help. Pepe's going to go along with you and assist you."

Jackie stepped back and shook his head furiously. "Oh, no, thank you. I appreciate the offer, but from the looks of things this might be a very dangerous caper. I can't run the risk of having Pepe with me."

"Don't underestimate him; he's as sharp as they come. Show him, Pepe."

Pepe dropped his eyes in slight embarrassment but he produced his hand from behind his back. Jackie was astonished to see his own watch in the outstretched palm.

"All right, I'll grant that he's a fantastic pickpocket, but that's not enough."

"That's not all," Rosarita argued. "There isn't a house built he can't get in and out of at will and he can handle a knife like a wizard. Put a cigarette in your mouth and watch him cut off the tip from across the room."

"I don't doubt that he can do it, but the answer is still no," Jackie insisted. He was remembering that one of the kidnap victims had already lost his life.

Rosarita seemed on the verge of arguing further but finally shrugged her shoulders. "Well, we tried. You'll have to admit, anyway, that he's quite a son—sort of a son of the Beech, don't you see. All right out with you."

At her order the boy bobbed his head in Jackie's direction and they disappeared from the room. Jackie grinned as he watched the youngster. It was probably not the ideal way for the boy to be raised, but the youth seemed healthy and happy. And there was no denying the obvious affection between Pepe and his "mother."

"Now," he said finally, bringing himself back to the task at hand, "I'd

like to have a look at Ramon's things."

"This is his room," Rosarita explained, opening the door onto what might have been the room of any typical American teenager.

Jackie glanced about, looking for a logical place to begin his search. There was some sports equipment, odds and ends of the sort that would appeal to a teenage boy and remain mysterious to anyone else, a collection of phonograph records he noticed that several of the albums were by Dingo Stark, the popular English singer. Another time he would have enjoyed telling Rosarita about his own experiences with the rock and roll singer, but at the present he had other things on his mind.

The walls, too, were decorated in typical teenage fashion, with photos and clippings from magazines. "I see he was a fan of James Dean," Jackie commented, glancing at the photos.

"Idolized him," Rosarita answered.

"So did most of the teenagers in the United States." It had been only a year ago that the handsome, untamed actor had been killed in a motorcycle accident. His death, however, had done nothing to diminish the number of his fans; if anything they had increased, making a martyr of the dead actor.

"Well, I guess I'd better start digging," he said, seating himself at Ramon's desk. It was the less glamorous part of sleuthing but always important. It was impossible to tell when and where the all-important clue might turn up.

"I'll leave you to yourself," Rosarita told him. "I have a little surprise I want to prepare for you."

Jackie did not bother to ask what the surprise might be. He knew full well that she would reveal it to him when she was ready and not before.

His search, however, intensive as it was, revealed nothing that could be regarded as a clue. At the end of an hour he felt no closer to solving the disappearance of Ramon than he had been when he started.

Disappointed, he left the room and returned to the parlor where Rosarita was waiting.

"Any luck?" she asked, looking up as he entered the room.

"Not a thing," he answered. "I think the place to begin would be Los Angeles. Speaking of that, by the way, I was supposed to meet my partner a long time ago, I'd better see if I can track him down."

"You aren't forgetting about my little surprise, are you?" she asked, her eyes twinkling. "I thought you'd like to have a little pleasure before you left."

Jackie shook his head, glancing at his watch. "Don't think I'd better this time, but thanks anyway. Which way out?"

She shrugged. "If you insist, it's through that door over there."

Jackie crossed to the door indicated and opened it, pausing. His first thought was that she had made a mistake. The door opened not into the hall but into a small dimly lit room. He had half moved to close the door when he recognized the figure reclining on the bed.

"Jorge," he addressed the figure. So this was her surprise. There was no point in even questioning how she had known about his Latin lover. He hesitated for another moment, glancing at his watch. "Ten minutes at the most," he said, stepping into the room and closing the door after himself.

"That's enough for twice, señor," Jorge answered him.

* * * *

Gun in hand, Shannon made his way slowly and cautiously toward the rambling house. The heavy drapes at the windows allowed little more than a trickle of light to escape.

He couldn't even be too sure that it was the right house. It had taken him better than an hour of searching to spot the taxi in which he had seen Jackie abducted and the taxi had been parked not at this house but some distance down the street. This was, however, the only house to be found on this dark, back street. He could only hope it was the right one. He reached the window from which the light was visible and he paused again. Now what? If he went crashing into the house he might be putting Jackie in even greater danger. At the same time, the longer he delayed the greater the danger was going to be anyway.

He had started to move again when a barely audible sound stopped him. He strained his ears listening. "Oh, no," he said softly to himself.

“It can't be!"

But it was. Faint though it might be, there was no mistaking the sound of humming and a moment later he heard a strange voice saying “hum louder.” The result was not a change in volume but only in pitch.

With a sigh Shannon replaced his gun in its holster and reached instead for a cigarette. Obviously Jackie was in no danger and just as obviously he was enjoying himself. The logical thing, it seemed, was to have a cigarette and wait for the concert to be finished.

"Well I'll be damned,” he said to himself after a moment of listening. “It *is* the *William Tell* Overture."

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Chapter 5

Shannon woke up with the turning of the car and recognized the thin street on which Jackie's apartment was located.

"Almost home," Jackie informed him.

Shannon lit a cigarette and ran his fingers wearily through his hair. "It's been a long night," he commented.

"Morning," Jackie corrected him. It was true, the sky was already beginning to lighten with approaching dawn. For Jackie it had been a most interesting and certainly enjoyable evening. Aside from the pleasant companionship that Jorge had provided, he felt as though they had gained their first important lead. At least they now knew the reason behind the kidnapping, ugly though that reason might be. All that remained for them to learn was the identity of the kidnappers and how the kidnapping was being arranged. He smiled to himself. All?

He had parked the Rolls in the stall in the garage before he noticed for the first time the peculiar bundle on the floor in the rear. "Oh, no," he said aloud. "It couldn't be." Reaching down he lifted one end of the brightly colored blanket. It was. "Pepe!"

Awakened from sleep by the sound of his name, the young boy stared blankly up at him for a moment before recognition brought a sleepy smile to his face.

"What in the hell is that?" Shannon demanded, staring in astonishment at the boy.

"It's not a what," Jackie replied with a sigh. "It's a who. To be exact, Pepe le Coco. I think you could call him a son of a Beech."

"Don't swear at him; he's just a kid." Shannon scolded him.

"I'd hardly describe him as just a kid," Jackie said. "In any event, you're now looking at our new partner.'

Pepe meanwhile had scrambled from the back seat of the car to stand in front of them. From his pocket he produced an envelope which he handed to Jackie. Jackie opened it to read the note inside.

"Take care of him, love," it read. "He's the last one I've got."

"Our partner?" Shannon was aghast. "You've got to be kidding."

"I'll explain it all to you upstairs," Jackie said. "For the moment I think he looks like he should be in bed." With Shannon still shaking his head doubtfully and a sleepy but smiling Pepe trailing behind, Jackie led the way up to his apartment.

Once he had Pepe bedded down for the rest of the night, at least what was left of it, Jackie poured drinks for himself and Shannon and explained, as best he could, the presence of the youngster.

"It's a damned good thing," Shannon said when he had finished, "the border patrol didn't check the car when we came back into the country. I'd have a hell of a time explaining that to Lou Upton."

"Personally I don't think that Lou would bat an eye at anything you told him about this case. But you're right. Pepe is going to be a problem."

"Can't we just send him back to Tijuana?"

"You don't know Rosarita Beech." Jackie stared thoughtfully into space for a moment. "On the other hand, maybe we're not giving that old girl full credit. She might be ahead of both of us."

"What do you mean by that?" Shannon asked.

Jackie twirled his glass in his hand. "This ring has been after teenage fellows right? And if we're going to get a lead on them we might need a decoy. It's dangerous, I'll admit, for Pepe—but I have a feeling it wouldn't be the first time he's been exposed to danger. Besides, with two of us keeping our eyes on him *it* might work safely."

Shannon remained unconvinced. "I still don't like it," he argued. "It's risky enough for adult, well-trained agents."

Jackie finished his drink. "Well, it can't hurt to let him stay here until we decide what to do. As long as he's here Rosarita will feel that he's being useful. For now I'd suggest we both call it a night. It's going to be a busy day."

It seemed to Shannon that he had only closed his eyes before Jackie was knocking at the door of his room to awaken him. His good humor was not helped either to discover that both Jackie and Pepe were

already up and dressed, looking wide awake and ready for action.

"There's coffee made," Jackie informed him. "And for heaven's sake don't look so grumpy. I'd hate to have you looking at me like that from the next pillow."

"Don't you wish," Shannon replied caustically as he made his way toward the kitchen. He returned with a steaming mug of coffee which he gulped down as rapidly as possible. "Lovely," Jackie commented, glancing in his direction.

With some embarrassment Shannon realized he was shirtless. "As I remember," he grumbled, "you've already seen the rest of it."

"Yes, but my memory is bad," Jackie informed him with a smile. "I don't suppose you'd care to refresh it?"

"Forget it!" Shannon snapped, heading for the bedroom to retrieve his shirt.

It took no small amount of discussion to convince Pepe he should remain at the apartment. In the end it was only the argument that someone had to protect Sophie that convinced him to stay behind.

Jackie and Shannon headed first for the C.A.M.P. offices; Rich, as usual, was there when they arrived. "Any luck?" He greeted them as they entered through the rest room door.

"It looks like we might be on to something," Jackie informed him. Briefly he recounted the previous evening's activities to Rich.

"What's next?" Rich asked.

"That's a good question," Jackie said. "Frankly I don't have the vaguest idea which direction to go from here."

It was Shannon who offered the first suggestion. "What about the other missing boys? Maybe if we searched their homes and looked into them a little more closely we'd find some tie-in."

"Good idea," Jackie agreed. "We may uncover something that the others missed."

* * * *

At the first of the homes they were greeted by the mother of the missing youth, who eagerly invited them in when she learned that

they were investigators. “Have you learned anything about my Bobby?” she asked anxiously. “It's been a month now since he's gone.” Her disappointment when they told her they had learned nothing new was obvious but she held up well.

"We'd like to take a look at Bobby's room,” Jackie informed her. “We're hoping to find something there that was missed before."

"If you think it will help,” she answered sadly but without confidence.

Bobby's room, Jackie observed, was not much different from Ramon's. There was the same assortment of teenage paraphernalia—the sporting items, a few books, records, even photos on the wall. Yet despite the efforts of both of them, they were unable to find a single clue.

The same was true at the second stop. “If only we knew what we were looking for,” Shannon complained. “But these kids are all so ordinary. There's scarcely any difference from one room to the next. The same clothes, the same records."

"Even the same idols,” Jackie finished for him.

Shannon followed Jackie's gaze to the wall where Dean James's photo smiled back at them. “Maybe,” Jackie said, speaking slowly, “it's not something unusual that we're looking for. Maybe it's the things they have in common."

"But it doesn't seem likely that a kidnapping ring would research the backgrounds of their victims to find out if they were all alike."

"But it might work in reverse,” Jackie argued. “What if it were the interests of the victims that brought them to the ring?"

Shannon considered the possibility for a moment. “You mean maybe the dead movie star there? What if the fan clubs were only fronts for the kidnapping ring?"

"No, there's too many of those clubs and essentially they're honest. The most they're guilty of is milking a few dollars out of some gullible kids. But if someone were utilizing the membership lists of the fan clubs, *it* would give them a perfect lure."

"To lead the victims into a trap. You know it sounds like you might have something there."

Jackie's mind was already fast at work. “You go ahead with this list. Check out the other boys, see if by any chance they were also Dean James fans. In the meantime I'll see what I can dig up back at the office."

Jackie left Shannon to continue the search and drove rapidly back toward The Round Up and the secret offices of C.A.M.P. Things were finally beginning to take shape. If his hunches were right about the fan club, they might well have need of Pepe's assistance after all. It was a dangerous game and one in which one wrong play could have disastrous results. But they were playing for high stakes, including the lives and the welfare of countless young men. He could not afford to let any possibility pass by unheeded.

Rich was busy at work when Jackie arrived again at the C.A.M.P. office. “Not much to report here,” he answered Jackie's greeting. “I've run the report on the missing boys through the Electronic Brain half a dozen times without finding anything in the way of clues, unless you're interested in knowing that all the boys were blond."

"I don't see much of a lead in that,” Jackie admitted. “But you can never tell, it might prove to be important before we're finished."

While Rich listened patiently Jackie explained the latest development in the case. “It's risky, I know,” he concluded, “but I think I'm going to enroll Pepe in a Dean James fan club just to see if anything happens."

"I wish there were some way we could follow it up without taking that risk."

"So do I,” Jackie agreed, “but I don't see how. It would look pretty silly for Shannon or I to enroll, and anyway, we're too old to interest the people we're after. Pepe has all the qualifications blond, cute as a button, young ... he just might be too young—the others were all a little older. But I think it's worth a try. In any case, we'll keep close tabs on him any time he's out, especially when he's attending any sort of meetings."

Rich yielded as he customarily did where Jackie was concerned. “I'll get you the name and address of a local fan club,” he said, starting toward the inner office. “You can explain that he's your kid brother."

He was back in a minute with the information. “I suppose it goes without saying,” he commented as he gave Jackie the report, “that you're going to be in a bit of danger yourself. You'll be careful, won't you?"

Jackie smiled up at the giant of a man affectionately. He was always touched by Rich's devotion to him. It was difficult to remember that someone who looked as rugged and as tough as Rich could experience such tender feelings.

"I'll be careful," he promised. "I always am."

Rich frowned at the statement. "No, actually you're usually quite reckless where your own neck is concerned. Someday maybe I'll be able to persuade you to give up this business. The two of us could be very happy together, selling flowers or something easy like that."

Jackie shook his head. "No we wouldn't, and you know it. It's in our blood, this never-ending fight against crime and injustice."

"I guess you're right," Rich agreed reluctantly. "But you know how I feel about you."

"I know," Jackie answered sincerely, "and I could never express the affection I feel for you. But let's be honest, I use sex as just another weapon, sometimes the most important one I employ. And even if it weren't necessary for this work I'd still require that sort of variety. I could never be faithful to any one man and you'd never be happy knowing I wanted and needed others."

"Like Shannon?" Despite his efforts, Rich's jealousy showed through briefly.

"Like Shannon," Jackie admitted openly. "Don't think for a minute that I'd turn down any opportunity to tangle with that hunk of male beauty. Even if I can't convince him that won't stop me from wanting it."

Rich smiled slightly. "Knowing you," he said without sarcasm, "you'll find some way to convince him. Now me, of course, I'm easier to convince."

Jackie cocked one eyebrow. "You mean, like right now?"

"I've got the time," Rich purred. His eagerness was written all over his face.

"And I've got the inclination," Jackie answered. He stood and without further conversation led the way into the bedroom.

There was no wasted time. Jackie undressed quickly and stretched out

on the bed, watching as Rich disrobed. The body that was revealed as the clothes came off was beautiful in an awesome, even frightening way. Jackie knew that there were many who had been frightened by Rich's giant dimensions. For himself, Jackie knew the body before him as a source of pleasure in proportion to its size; it held no fear for him.

Their kisses were long, searching delights, Rich's tongue raping Jackie's eager mouth. Their bodies locked together, squirming and rubbing as their need mounted. Jackie began to kiss his companion's body, working his way downward, his skilled lips blazing a trail over the heaving stomach, down lower, until he had reached his goal. It would not take long, he realized.

He thrilled as Rich twisted, changing positions, and then they were again locked together in an embrace of mutual joy, bodies rocking and plunging in unison. Carefully Jackie coaxed and teased, then delayed, until both were ready, roaring to the mutual conclusion that he preferred. Gasping and lurching, they reached the apex and soared together to the heights of physical gratification.

He would like to have lingered when it was finished, but Jackie was aware that time was passing and that time was the enemy of the crime fighter. He rose from the bed and began to dress again.

"Someday," Rich said in a small, sad voice, "we won't have to hurry up and get out of bed."

"Maybe," Jackie answered. He blew his friend an affectionate kiss and left for his apartment.

Pepe and Sophie were there to welcome him home. "I've kept a sharp eye on Sophie," Pepe informed him proudly.

"Good job." Jackie gave the youngster an enthusiastic pat on the back. "But right now I want to talk to you about your next assignment.'

Pepe's eyes brightened. "Oh, now I get to go after the real criminals, yes?"

Jackie studied him for a moment before answering. "Yes."

Briefly, careful not to make the work sound too glamorous, Jackie explained that he wanted to enroll Pepe in a fan club. "It may be absolutely nothing," he pointed out, "or it may be the lead we need to break this case. In either event, I want you to know that it may be dangerous. Of course we'll do everything possible to minimize that

danger."

"I'm not afraid," Pepe insisted proudly. "I will take my knife with me."

"No, I'm afraid I can't let you do that. That might just be asking for trouble. But I'm going to give you a very effective means of protection. It means putting you to sleep for a short while."

"To sleep?"

Jackie produced a small package, opening it to reveal what appeared to be nothing more than a realistic imitation of a thumbnail. "There's practically no pain involved," he explained, allowing the boy to hold the thumbnail. "What I do is remove your own nail and replace it with this one."

"Why?" Pepe was more puzzled than worried about the operation.

"Simple. The one you're holding in your palm is a homing device. It broadcasts signals that cause the receiver in my thumb to throb. That way I'll always know where you are, assuming of course that you're within a few miles."

Far from being alarmed over the prospect, Pepe was quite excited. "Why do I have to go to sleep? Can't I stay awake and watch you change them?"

"Afraid not," Jackie insisted, "but I can promise you that by the time you wake up the pain will be all gone."

Pepe at last was persuaded to take the sleeping draught that Jackie prepared for him. The "operation" was quite simple, one that took only a few minutes. Once installed the homing device worked perfectly. Jackie bandaged up the thumb and made himself some coffee while he waited for the boy to sleep off the draught.

They were ready now for the next and most dangerous step—making Pepe a member of the Dean James fan club that Rich had recommended. After that there was no way of knowing what might happen.

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Chapter 6

It was the following night before Jackie and Shannon escorted Pepe to his first fan club meeting. The meetings of this particular club were held in the converted garage of one of the fan's parents. During the afternoon they had driven by to look over the area. A location for Shannon to stand guard had been decided upon. For this first meeting Jackie, posing as Pepe's older brother, would accompany Pepe. However, a location was also selected for him. From the sites they had selected the two agents could safely cover the garage meeting place, observe the comings and goings, and be close at hand if anything came up in the way of trouble.

Back at the apartment again, Jackie sketched a rough map of the area and they rehearsed how they would act in emergencies. Pepe was given a small whistle to be worn on a chain around his neck but under his shirt so it would not be observed.

"That's just in case," Jackie assured him. "It'll bring us both running. Of course you know where we both will be waiting and ideally, if things seem peculiar, you should try to slip out of the garage and get to one or the other of us, all right? No heroics."

Pepe agreed and repeated the instructions to prove that he remembered everything. Finally it was time for the meeting itself. Shannon was dropped off a block before they arrived to take up his post. Jackie parked the car in the alley where the garage was located, conveniently near in case they needed it.

The fan club was, for all practical purposes, run for and by the fans, at least on the local level. To be sure some of the members were well past the teen years, but by and large the group looked like any gathering of young people. Jackie had explained, when he called and talked to the club president, that he would like to attend with his brother Leroy, which was the name attached to Pepe now. As he had explained it, he wanted merely to assure himself that the environment of the club was a healthy one. He made himself inconspicuous, however, by seating himself in the rear near the door, while Leroy was introduced around.

This particular evening it seemed they were all in for a special treat—one of the members had brought a special collection of Dean James

color slides, privately taken photos. Most of them were amateurish, shots taken at a distance, showing the star outside his home or racing on his motorcycle, but each new slide brought oohs and ahhs from the teens. The evening seemed to Jackie interminably long. Finally, however, it was over, and without incident.

"Of course," Jackie said as the three of them drove back to the apartment later, "I didn't really expect anything to happen there. It's now that the meeting is over and Pepe is officially a member of the local fan club that we'll see whether we're on the right track or not."

The answer, as it turned out, was not long in coming—but the results were disastrous. Although Jackie and Shannon had taken every precaution to guard Pepe when he was out, it had not occurred to either of them that he might be in any danger in Jackie's apartment. Nor had they guessed how quickly things would start happening.

The following afternoon Jackie and Shannon drove to the C.A.M.P. offices. As usual Pepe stayed safely—so they presumed at the apartment to "guard" Sophie. The dog and the young boy had taken to each other like old friends.

They were playing in the living room when the doorbell rang from below. "Special messenger," was the answer over the intercom when Pepe asked who was calling.

"Leave the message in the box," Pepe instructed the messenger. He had been warned about admitting strangers to the apartment. He waited for a while and then took the elevator to the lobby. The message was in the box as he had instructed and it was addressed to him. He waited until he was in the apartment again before opening it. When he did, the announcement it contained gave him a shock:

"Dean James is alive in Argentina," it read in capital letters. Below that in smaller print it went on, "As a loyal and devoted fan you are among the first to share this news, which will soon be announced to the world. A special secret meeting has been called for today at 6 p.m. Tell no one of this and come to the candy store at the intersection of 10th and Vermont promptly at 6 p.m."

Alarmed, Pepe glanced at the clock on the wall. It was already five o'clock, scarcely an hour to go before the appointed time, and he knew how important this lead was to solving the case for Jackie and Shannon.

He went into Jackie's den and examined the large map of the city on

the wall there. It would not be difficult to get to the address by bus, at the most a twenty-minute ride. That gave him forty minutes to wait for Jackie, to see if the two adults returned in time to take advantage of the opportunity. If not he had already made up his mind to act, rather than seeing this important lead go down the drain.

He waited anxiously, watching the clock as it moved slowly on, the minutes seeming like hours. Still there was no sign of Jackie. Five-thirty came, then five-thirty-five.

Excited and more than a little nervous, Pepe prepared to leave the apartment. When he donned his sweater Sophie ran up to him, clawing at his legs to be permitted to go with him. He hesitated for a moment before he remembered that he had promised to guard Sophie. The only way he could do that was take her with him.

"All right, girl," he said, taking her leash from its hook near the door, "you can come along but don't be scared, I'll protect you." And either for her assurance or his own, he removed his small but deadly throwing knife from his pocket and studied it briefly. Then, returning the weapon to his pocket, he left the apartment with Sophie. On the credenza he left the message he had received and a note for Jackie. There was still a chance Jackie might return in time to join him at the candy store; although he wouldn't admit it, especially to himself, that was what he was most hoping for.

He had no difficulty finding the right bus, although it took some coaxing to persuade the man to let Sophie on as well. His guesses about time had been accurate. It was only a minute or two before six when he stepped off the bus at the intersection of 10th and Vermont. Directly across the street from him was the candy store, a tiny, inconspicuous shop. Beside it was a narrow driveway leading, so the sign said, to a parking area in the rear.

Swallowing, Pepe approached the door of the shop. The door was locked and the shades pulled down over the windows. For a moment he thought he had made some mistake; then, unexpectedly, the door was opened a crack.

"You're Leroy?" a voice asked from inside.

Not certain he could trust his voice, for he was suffering a puzzling bout of nervousness, Pepe nodded. The door was opened just wide enough for him to enter. Screwing up his courage, he stepped inside. The door was closed and locked after him, so quickly that Sophie

barely managed to duck inside with him.

"What's this?" one of the three men in the room demanded, pointing at the dog.

"That's Sophie," Pepe explained, stooping down to pat the dog, who was growling ominously.

"She can't stay with you," the stranger snapped. Like the other two, he was a tough-looking individual, the type that Pepe had been trained by his mother to regard as trouble.

"I have to keep her with me," the youngster insisted.

"You can't," another of them argued in a rough voice. "You've been especially selected to meet Dean James himself, in Argentina. The dog can't go with you."

"Argentina?" Pepe was shocked and alarmed. He had been counting on stalling them here until, hopefully, Jackie and Shannon would catch up with him. "But I can't go to Argentina."

"You want to see Dean James, don't you?" one of the three asked coaxingly. They had moved closer to him, one of them blocking the door.

Pepe swallowed hard, looking from one to the other. They meant business, he was sure—they meant to take him with them, with or without his permission. "I think I'd better go home," he stammered, backing away from them. He reached for the knife in his pocket.

The man nearest him grabbed and the knife clattered on the floor. At the same instant Sophie sprang into action. She leaped as though fired from a rocket, and with her teeth bared there was little doubt that she meant business. The one who had grabbed Pepe yelped as her teeth sank into his arm, ripping the flesh viciously. "What the ...?" he shouted. "Someone get this monster off me."

He jumped back, stumbled, and crashed to the floor. Sophie was upon him and this time she went for his throat. He screamed loudly and threw up his arm to protect himself.

Pepe tried again for the door but there were still the other two. He was grabbed up from the floor in strong arms. Despite his shouts and struggles he was carried to the rear and another door there.

"Sophie," he screamed, trying desperately to cling to the doorjamb. Then there was a crash of splintering wood and a shot rang out.

* * * *

At the offices of C.A.M.P., Jackie, Shannon, and Rich had applied themselves to reviewing once again the reports on the kidnapping ring, in the hope of finding some new clue. Their efforts, however, were unsuccessful.

"Nothing but what we've seen before," Rich concluded, putting aside the photographs. "The boys are all a similar type light hair, fair complexions, as American as apple pie."

"There's one thing that puzzles me about this whole business," Jackie said. "The law of supply and demand. Why would an organization go to the trouble of kidnapping these boys to work as prostitutes?"

"That's a good question," Rich agreed thoughtfully. "There's no shortage of boys who would willingly go to work for them. This city and every other major city in the world has plenty such fellows."

"Unless," Jackie added, "it were a case of a demand for which there was no supply."

"What do you mean by that?" Shannon asked.

"Suppose these boys were needed some place where there was a shortage of their particular type available. In some places of the world, for instance, blonds are a rarity."

"You know, that just might be the answer," Rich agreed with him. "Boys of this type—American, fair-skinned, blond hair—would be a novelty in the houses of the Middle East or North Africa."

Even Shannon had to agree that the idea made sense. "But how do we go about locating the exact destination?" he asked. "They could be shipping these boys to any one of hundreds of places."

"Well, for one thing," Jackie said, "we can notify High Camp, our headquarters, of the idea. They in turn will contact our offices throughout that part of the world. If there's been any sudden surge in the availability of American male prostitutes we'll be informed."

"I'll get to work on that right away," Rich offered, standing.

Jackie glanced at his watch; it was almost five-thirty. “I think we'd better get back to the apartment, just in case anything new develops there."

"It's kind of early for that,” Shannon said. “We only got Pepe into the club yesterday."

Jackie did not explain that he had suddenly experienced a warning sensation, as though something might be wrong. His intuition had proved invaluable to him in the past, but it was the sort of thing he could not expect others to have faith in. “I'd just feel better if we were there,” was all he said. Fortunately, Shannon did not argue the point.

As they neared the apartment building Jackie's vague feeling of disaster began to grow. “Something's wrong,” he said simply, tramping down on the accelerator. “I'm not getting any signal from Pepe's homing device."

Shannon shot him an anxious look. “Maybe it's not working properly."

"Either that,” Jackie agreed, careening into the garage on two wheels, “or he's not here."

They left the car in the center of the garage without bothering to park it and dashed to the elevator. Even its rapid ascent seemed slow as they shot to the top.

"They're gone,” Jackie declared as they entered the apartment. “If Sophie were here she'd be out by now to greet me."

Shannon was the first to see the message on the credenza. They read it together, exchanging grim looks. “It's almost six now,” Shannon said, looking up at the clock on the wall.

"Maybe we can get there in time,” Jackie said. Shannon was only a second after him. “That crazy kid,” Jackie muttered under his breath as the elevator carried them back downstairs. He did not add that he regarded this entire event as his own fault. He was the one who had decided to use Pepe as a decoy. If anything went wrong now he would be responsible for the loss of both of Rosarita's sons and he would never be able to forgive himself. Even as he drove through the evening crush of traffic he reached inside his jacket and withdrew a small, elegantly jeweled gun.

"That looks like a toy,” Shannon said, regarding the weapon. His own police revolver was in his hand, ready to fire.

"Derringer," Jackie explained automatically. "It's only a one shot, but at close range it can be deadly." It was the only gun he normally carried and that for use only in emergencies. His position with Even SI C.A.M.P. gave him no license to kill and in most cases he relied upon of the blot his wits. This time, however, he had every intention of using the gun if necessary.

"Six o'clock," Shannon said as they neared the intersection. "I only hope we're in time."

Jackie veered to the curb and left the car where it was, ignoring the no parking signs. They were halfway to the door when they heard the shout from within the shop. "That's Pepe," Jackie said, his heart in his throat.

"I'll get the door," Shannon yelled to him. "You take over inside."

Get the door was exactly what he did. Without even slowing his pace he threw himself bodily against the flimsy paneling. The door gave with a crash before him, sending him toppling to the floor inside.

One of the men inside was trying to save himself from a mad, determined-to-kill Sophie. The other two were at the rear door of the shop with Pepe in their arms. Jackie fired and one of the two at the door crumpled up and fell. Even as Shannon fired at the other one, however, the door had slammed after him.

"The driveway," Jackie yelled as he headed for the rear door. "You go that way."

Shannon raced for the door, but before he got there he heard the roar of a powerful motor. He jumped outside as a big sedan roared out how, but in of the drive, almost crashing into an oncoming car in the stream of traffic. Shannon raised his gun to shoot and then remembered that Pepe was in the car as well.

He dashed to the Rolls again. By the time Jackie emerged from the shop dragging a badly wounded gangster, with Sophie at their heels, Shannon was ready to go.

Pursuit, however, was futile. He drove for several blocks but there was no trace of the car in which Pepe had been abducted.

"We'll have to try to get some information out of him," he said, indicating the barely conscious hood in the rear.

Jackie slapped the man soundly several times to bring him to his senses. “Where are they going?” he demanded, his voice a snarl.

Even Shannon was surprised by the tone. This was yet another side of the blond agent, one he hadn't seen before. Instead of a flamboyant homosexual, Jackie was now hard as nails, as vicious an adversary as a criminal could have.

"London,” the man croaked. “In a private plane."

"Where was it leaving from?” Jackie insisted, shaking the man to keep him awake.

"I don't know.” There was another slap as Jackie struck him harshly again. “Honest,” he sobbed, “I don't know. The other guy was doing the driving."

Jackie released his hold on the gangster, who fell in a limp heap across the seat. “Let's turn him over to Lou Upton,” he instructed Shannon, breathing heavily, “and then head back to the office. We'll notify C.A.M.P. and Interpol. I want every plane flying into London or the vicinity searched."

Tense with frustration and anger, Jackie leaned back against the seat. They had learned one thing—their theory that the boys were being taken abroad seemed to be correct. But they still didn't know where it was the boys were being taken. And now the ring had a new victim, one that he had personally sworn to protect.

One thing was certain: he was going to find them. He didn't know how, but he would stamp out this vicious ring once and for all, and that was one vow he intended to keep.

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Chapter 7

The next day was an agony of waiting for Jackie and Shannon. Several times Jackie contemplated contacting Rosarita Beech to inform her of what had happened and each time he delayed, hoping that something would turn up.

The reports from Rich, however, were uniformly disappointing. “Upton's men have questioned that thug for hours,” he explained unhappily. “He simply knows nothing. He had just joined the outfit. He knew only one of the men who was with him, another small-time hood. All he was told was that he was to help grab a kid at the candy store and ‘escort’ him to some unknown place, where a plane would be waiting to carry them to London."

"Any word on the plane?” Shannon asked.

Rich shook his head. “Not a thing. Every flight, commercial or private, coming into the London area has been checked, with no results. There's a good possibility, you realize, that London was only a fake destination. They obviously didn't trust the hood we caught with too much information."

"So we're back where we started."

"What about the other angle?” Jackie asked. “Has C.A.M.P. come across any American-type prostitutes anywhere?"

"Nothing yet,” Rich informed him.

There was a light, tinkling sound, similar to the sound of wind chimes except that there was no breeze inside the office. “High Camp,” Rich explained, starting for the inner office from which he remained in communication with the headquarters. “They may have something for us."

Jackie seated himself on one of the sofas. It had been twenty-four hours already since Pepe had disappeared and still no trace of him.

"Don't take it so hard,” Shannon said sympathetically. To his own surprise he really did feel sorry for the man from C.A.M.P. He had learned to respect and even admire his fellow agent and he knew how

heavily the current situation was weighing upon the slender shoulders.

"I just want another crack at them," Jackie answered grimly. He managed a smile, however, grateful for the fact that Shannon understood.

"We'll get it," Shannon assured him.

Rich returned a moment later, and despite his customary air of calm he was plainly excited. "It looks like we might have something," he announced.

Jackie and Shannon were both on their feet at once. "Let's have it," Jackie told him.

"One of our informers in Lisbon ran into an old trick of his there—an American fellow who used to be a commercial pilot. He ran into some trouble a few years back and was fired, apparently because of his homosexuality. Since then he only flies occasionally, for private outfits, and apparently the arrangements are sometimes on the shady side."

"How does that tie in with our case?" Shannon wanted to know.

"Just this: the American wasn't supposed to be in Lisbon at all; he was approached recently to fly along on a private trip to London. No details about the trip, but the pay was damned generous. Anyway, they started out for London, but once in the air they changed courses and landed instead at a private field near Lisbon. The co-pilot, our American friend, was paid off and left on his own."

"That's go to be it," Shannon exclaimed excitedly.

"We're going to Lisbon," Jackie announced. "I want to finish this one up myself. Rich, you clear it with headquarters."

"I'll arrange the flight," Shannon offered.

"That won't be necessary," Rich told him. "C.A.M.P. will arrange that. You two get yourselves ready to travel."

"I'm ready," Jackie said simply.

"So am I," Shannon echoed.

Rich reentered the inner room. He was back in a few minutes. "All

set," he informed them. "The plane will be ready for you when you get there."

"You have your own air force?" Shannon asked, astonished again by the operation of C.A.M.P.

"Ever hear of a fairy that couldn't fly?" Jackie asked with a grin. The prospect of action had restored his good spirits.

"You'll have to make allowances for me," Shannon answered. "I don't think I'd get very far with a broomstick."

"I wish I were going with you," Rich said, giving Jackie a look which Shannon deliberately did not try to analyze.

"We'll be careful," Jackie promised.

* * * *

An hour and a half later Shannon was totally lost. The route they had followed out of the city had been a roundabout and, he suspected, deliberately confusing one. He knew only that they were somewhere east of Los Angeles, in the desert.

"Is this it?" he asked as Jackie turned off the road.

"Just about." Jackie was busy steering the car around and occasionally through the ruts in front of them.

Shannon stared straight ahead at the wall of rock they were approaching. Then, mysteriously, the wall opened and they drove into what had seemed a solid cliff, to find themselves in a vast chamber.

"Is this headquarters?" Shannon asked. The room was not unlike a huge, indoor parking garage.

"That's something even I don't know," Jackie informed him simply. He led the way to an elevator, which carried them swiftly downward. They emerged at the end of what appeared to be an ordinary airport runway, except that it was covered.

"Impressive," Shannon commented, looking about. "But just how do we get into the air?"

"It opens," Jackie answered, indicating the roof far above them.

"It's operated by sound—the sound of the jets, specifically. By the time

we've gone down the runway this is an open airport."

* * * *

The plane was ready for them. On the outside it looked like an ordinary 727 jet, except that there was no emblem or lettering to indicate an airline and the color was a bit unusual, a pale lavender. Inside, however, the plane was like a luxury apartment, complete with dining room, a combination office and living room, and a private bedroom to the rear.

"Impressive," Shannon said again. He was reaching the point where nothing about the operation of C.A.M.P. could surprise him. "I have to admit you do things in a big way."

"If you'd give me half a chance I'd show you how well I do things." Jackie seated himself in one of the spacious arm chairs and fastened his seat belt. Even while they were speaking the big jet began to taxi down the runway.

Shannon seated himself and fastened his own belt. "No thanks," was all he said.

"It's a long flight," Jackie reminded him.

And, Shannon reminded himself briefly, it had been a long time, by his standards, since he had enjoyed any sexual relief. He sighed aloud as the plane began to lift into the air. "Wake me when we get to Lisbon," he said aloud.

The morning sun was bright and golden as they approached Lisbon, coming in low toward the Portuguese airport. More or less awakened by the coffee Jackie had brought him, Shannon peered with interest out of the window.

"Ever been to Lisbon?" Jackie asked, noting his companion's curiosity.

Shannon grinned, one of those half-embarrassed smiles that Jackie had learned to recognize, the sort that turned him from a hardened agent into a shy young man. "No. To tell the truth, I've done little traveling. Most of my assignments have been in the United States."

"Too bad we're here on business," Jackie said, fastening his seat belt as the plane came in for a landing. "It can be an enchanting place to visit."

On the ground, Shannon followed Jackie's lead and ignored the curiosity aroused by the lavender, unmarked jet. They made their way without incident through the customs line and passport control and shortly afterward they were outside the airport.

A cabdriver, darkly handsome, sprang quickly into action, steering them toward his somewhat battered vehicle. To Shannon the man seemed like any of the other drivers waiting around to hustle business from the tourists. That illusion was dispelled, however, as soon as the cab had started to move away from the airport.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Holmes," the driver greeted Jackie, with scarcely a trace of the accent he had exhibited previously. "Have a nice flight?"

"Very," Jackie replied. "Any new developments here?"

"No. I have been keeping my eye on the pilot you are interested in. He is still in town and we will not have any trouble finding him tonight."

"The X Bar," Jackie suggested. The driver nodded. "It's a local gay bar," Jackie explained to Shannon. "However, it doesn't open until evening, usually about seven-thirty. I'm afraid we'll have to wait until then to check out our suspect."

Shannon accepted the explanation with a nod and turned his attention to the passing scene. They were coming into the city now and he was struck by its pastel freshness, the buildings all appearing as though they had just been painted their pink, yellow, and green colors. There was a striking contrast as well in the styles of the buildings. There were modern new apartments and wide avenues. Yet off the avenues were narrow, cobblestone streets winding their way up into the hills of the city. Colored tiles adorned ancient buildings, and gray walls that appeared centuries old towered over the city.

"It's lovely," he said aloud. "I'm afraid I don't know much about Portugal."

"Few people seem to today," Jackie said. "In the present Portugal is still being discovered by the tourists. Ironic, considering Portugal's past as an explorer. It's hard to believe, but in the space of a mere thirty-three years, from 1487 to 1520, Portuguese sailors reached the shores of China and Japan, Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope, Cabral discovered Brazil, de Gama made his way to India by sea, Real explored the coast of Greenland, and Magellan, as a climax to it all, made his way around the globe."

"Sounds like they were busy."

"It was the Golden Age," their driver commented. There was obvious pride in his voice and a trace of sadness too, perhaps for what was past.

"We're on the Avenida da Liberdade now," Jackie commented, indicating the wide thoroughfare down which they were moving, weaving in and out of rapid, erratic traffic. "It's the local Champs Elysee."

"But longer than the one in Paris," the driver was quick to point out.

With Jackie pointing out items of interest, they left the avenida and began to climb into the Alfama quarter, the old part of the city. In a short while they pulled up in front of a tall, narrow building with huge, elaborately carved wooden doors.

"See you later, Manuel," Jackie said as he climbed out of the car.

"Rich gave orders that I was to keep an eye on you,' Manuel argued. "Maybe I should stay here."

Jackie laughed but his voice was firm. "I promise we'll take care of ourselves. I don't think either of us would be comfortable with a bodyguard."

"If we need help I'll yell loudly," Shannon added to placate Manuel, who seemed on the verge of arguing the point further.

Jackie left him debating the question and with a quick "good-bye," led the way to the door. The bell, operated by a huge brass ring on the front of the building, produced a white-uniformed doorman, who ushered them into the vestibule.

"The house is ready for you," he greeted them. "Shall I stay or would you prefer it to yourselves?"

"I think we can manage all right," Jackie assured him. "The rooms on the top floor?"

"Yes, sir." As they started up the steps Shannon noticed that the led the servant let himself quietly out the front door. Jackie's whims, obviously, were rarely questioned.

There were three flights of steep stairs. "Whew," Shannon panted as

they neared the top. “I'd hate to have to hurry up and down these."

"It's worth it,” Jackie answered. He opened the door to one of the rooms at the top. “Take a look out the window."

Shannon did so and had to agree it was worth the climb. The rooftops of Lisbon were spread out beneath them. Beyond was the wide river Tagus and the harbor of the city. He caught sight of a fishing of boat there that looked, from stern to Phoenician prow, as though it were a vision from the ancient past.

"This is your room,” Jackie told him from the doorway. “Mine is just next door. We have some time to kill if you'd like to do a little sightseeing."

"Love it,” Shannon agreed enthusiastically.

A short time later they strolled through the old quarter, Shannon fascinated anew by the color and activity of the city. There were narrow, old streets with orange vendors and wine shops, dark, beautiful girls carrying jugs to the fountains. Old men were busy mending fish nets while old women approached them, smiling, to sell them sunflower seeds.

They sipped port in a dark café that reeked of intrigue and romance and then ate in a small restaurant where the waitresses wore bright, large-brimmed hats and their skirts twisted to resemble billowy pants.

It was after eight by the time they finished dinner. Jackie glanced at his watch as they sipped their coffee. Shannon noticed the gesture. “I guess it's time we got to work,” he commented. In truth he was sorry to see the day end. But he had already noticed the signs in Jackie, evidence that the blond was growing impatient to be in action again. And he himself was as determined as before to see the case through to its conclusion.

"You're right,” Jackie agreed, finishing his coffee. “It's time for a visit to The X Bar."

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Chapter 8

The X Bar was a dim, intriguing spot. One room consisted entirely of seats placed about low tables; here a few people were eating. In the other, slightly larger room, there were more chairs placed around smaller tables and a short bar about which men stood, singly or in groups.

Except for the fact that it was a homosexual bar, Shannon liked the place. The flickering lights from candles, the soft music playing, the faint scent of incense gave it a romantic atmosphere unique from anything he had visited before.

At first Shannon did not recognize the well-dressed, good-looking man who approached them. Not until the stranger smiled and extended his hand did he place him as Manuel, the cabdriver.

"You look like a member of the jet set," Shannon commented when they had exchanged greetings.

"He is," Jackie stated simply, "notwithstanding the work clothes he resorts to for professional reasons."

"Like your mannerisms," Shannon couldn't resist saying.

"Mannerisms?" Jackie produced a shocked expression. "I tell you, this is the real me."

Shannon left the statement unchallenged. The task of determining which of the many faces he presented was the real Jackie was a task he did not care to take on. He was learning to accept whichever Jackie was presented to him without question.

"Has our friend shown up?" Jackie asked in a lower voice.

Manuel nodded and pointed to a man seated at one end of the bar. Both Shannon and Jackie studied the man discreetly. Obviously American, Jackie concluded, and obviously someone who's been unhappy. At one time, probably not long ago, the pilot had been handsome. There was still a lingering quality of good looks, but too much drinking and hard living were rapidly erasing even the remnants.

"I guess this one's on me," Jackie decided finally, with a questioning glance at Shannon. "Unless he's more your type."

"Have my share," Shannon insisted. "But remember one thing—wherever you go I'm going to be close behind."

"If you like I'll ask him if you can watch," Jackie said. Without waiting for an answer he crossed the room toward the American.

"Lonesome?" he asked, taking the empty seat next to the man.

"I might be." The American turned to look at him, long and hard. Although he affected an air of indifference, Jackie was quick to note the sadness in the eyes, and the loneliness.

"Might you also be interested in some company?"

"What's your racket?" was the blunt response.

"I collect men," Jackie explained, meeting the gaze evenly. "Particularly men who look as though they're unhappy."

After another moment's scrutiny, the man shrugged. "Do you want a drink?"

"Love one, but don't expect me to catch up to you."

At that he finally grinned. "Does it show, all the drinking I've been doing?"

"Offhand I'd guess about two years without much break. But you're holding it well, at least for the present."

The American gave him another long, searching look. "You're blunt. I like that. What's your name?"

"Jackie. If you get to know me better, you can call me darling. What's yours?"

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"I promise, but it can't be that bad."

"Would you believe Sylvester?"

"That's pretty bad," Jackie agreed with a smile. "Surely you must have a nickname."

"My friends call me Les. Very few of them use darling anymore."

"Why don't you try me?" Jackie had already decided on the direct approach with this one. Mentally he crossed his fingers as he waited for Les to answer.

The silence was a long one. "Suits me," Les said finally, to Jackie's relief. "Want to come to my hotel?"

"Hotels are dangerous here, or didn't you know Lisbon has an active vice squad?"

"No, I didn't. What then?"

"My place. I'm using a friend's house while he's traveling."

For an answer Les finished off his drink and stood. "Let's go," he said.

Jackie noticed that Shannon and Manuel were nowhere in sight as they passed through the bar. His curiosity was soon satisfied, however, as a familiar cab pulled up to the curb beside them.

"Taxi?" Manuel asked, giving no sign of recognition.

Jackie had to admit, as they climbed into the cab, that the two agents had made a rapid transformation. Their jackets and ties had been discarded, their shirts rumpled. Shannon even sported a streak of dirt across the side of his face that gave him a sinister appearance.

He gave them the address and settled back in the seat. Both he and Les were silent during the ride. However, Les inched one hand across the seat and tickled his leg lightly.

As he paid Manuel for the ride Jackie passed him the spare key to the house, so that the two of them could let themselves inside. He personally doubted that there was any likelihood of trouble, but he knew they would feel better if they were close at hand.

Men, he thought, turning to smile flirtatiously at Les, who was waiting on the sidewalk. They always thought they were needed for protection. Not, of course, that he minded their concern.

"Wow," Les gasped as they reached the top of the stairs. "That's a hell of a way to sober up."

"Keeps one in condition," Jackie told him. He led the way into the bedroom and, crossing it, opened the shutters at the window. Beyond

the wrought iron railing the lights of Lisbon glittered like myriad jewels.

Les had crossed the room also, to stand close beside him. His hands, stronger than Jackie would have suspected, caught Jackie's arms in a firm grip. “Who are you?” he asked quietly. He sounded suddenly quite sober and far less friendly than he had before.

Jackie was aware of the open window before him. The house, like all of this quarter of the city, was built on a hill. It was a long way down to the roofs of the other houses. If he were to lose his balance or be pushed...

"What makes you ask that?” he asked evenly. “I thought I told you my name back in the bar."

"You were awfully curious,” Les said, his hands tightening their grip, “and awfully eager to get to know me. And don't tell me it's my magnetic charm. Besides, there's the question of those friends of yours, the ones who were with you in the bar and soon after that were driving a taxicab."

Jackie had to admit he had underestimated his companion. Les might be slowly drinking himself into oblivion but he was no fool. There was only one way to play it now, and that was on the level.

"Who do you think I am?” he hedged, not attempting to break away from the pilot.

"Some sort of cop?” Les suggested.

"That's close, but a rather special sort.” For a moment he thought Les was going to give him that shove, send him hurtling through the open window.

"What do you want with me?"

"Some information. And maybe your help."

His honesty had worked, at least partially. Les released his hold on him and turned away. “Why should I help any sort of cop?” he asked bitterly. “My last encounter with a cop brought me nothing but grief."

"It cost me a good career and the affection of my family."

"My job is a different one,” Jackie said, turning to face the other man.

"I work to help people caught in same sort of situation you were in. Have you ever heard of an organization called C.A.M.P.?"

Les shook his head but Jackie's statement had plainly aroused his interest. “No."

Briefly, Jackie explained the nature of C.A.M.P. and his own work with the organization.

"What's all this got to do with me?” Les wanted to know. “It's too late to do anything about my job. That's in the past."

"I'm working on a case right now. I came to Lisbon because the reports I had indicated you might be able to help me with it."

"In what way?” Les was suspicious again.

"I've been trying to track down a kidnapping ring. They've been abducting young men from the United States. I suspect they're supplying them to stud houses in other parts of the world."

"Why Lisbon?"

"Why not? There are such houses here, just as there are in other cities. And Lisbon is home for most of the exiled royalty of Europe, a very cosmopolitan city that attracts people of wealth from all over the world, some of them with perverted tastes. In addition, it's a good location from which to supply the areas of the Mediterranean—including all of North Africa, where blond, American types would he well liked and hard to come by."

"I see.” Les seated himself on the edge of the bed and paused to light a cigarette. “What has all this got to do with me?"

"You were hired to work as a co-pilot on a private flight that left California, presumably for London. Instead you flew here to Lisbon. I have reasons to suspect that at least one, maybe several, of the kidnap victims were on that plane."

Les smoked in silence for a moment, thoughtful. “It's possible. I saw nothing of the passengers. I was only hired at the last minute, for sizable pay. That usually indicates something shady, but I've learned not to ask questions."

"I want to know where that plane landed and anything else you can tell me about the people with whom you worked."

After another long silence Les nodded his head. “All right, I'll do what I can,” he said. “It was a large field and elaborately camouflaged, out of the city a distance. They blindfolded me but it slipped and I was able to follow our route into the city."

"When can we go?” Jackie was relieved to have won the argument and excited by the prospect that he might be drawing near to his quarry.

"Tonight, but not until much later. I don't want to get caught there. In the meantime I suppose we might have a drink."

He rose from the bed. In the moonlight streaming through the window he did not appear dissipated. He looked tall and ruggedly handsome, just as he must have looked before his career was ruined for him by an ugly scandal.

"Do you really need one?” Jackie asked softly. “There are other ways we could spend the time."

Les stared at him in the semidarkness. “I thought all of that was just a line, to enlist my help."

Jackie shook his head and smiled. “Not all of it."

Les didn't take much coaxing on that score. He opened his arms as Jackie came across the room to him, and the smaller body moved into them. It started as a gentle, sweet kiss and then grew into a passionate, crushing embrace. Les stepped backward, finding the bed, and fell, taking Jackie with him. They rolled together on its surface, still locked in their embrace.

The zipper of his trousers was no match for Jackie's skilled fingers and Les shuddered with excitement as his bare flesh was grasped warmly, eagerly.

Despite their ardor there was no hurrying or rushing. In this Jackie was an artist, and the experience was one such as Les had never known before, not in the same way, not so maddeningly sure and perfect. The world beyond the bed ceased to exist; there was only the feel of soft, hot lips upon him, of deft hands that fondled and groped, seeking and finding the most sensitive parts of his anatomy, until Les thought that he must scream to express the delicious agony he was enduring.

"Yes, yes,” he gasped as a new source of sensation was discovered.

"You're wild, like nobody else."

"Only when I'm inspired," Jackie paused long enough to answer.

And he was inspired by the body lunging against him, rolling and twisting in response to each touch. It was still a good body, big boned and brawny. Too, he felt that it had been a long, long time since the man with him had really felt desired or had truly given himself up to such pleasures. It might almost have been the first time for his partner, and Jackie was reveling in helping him to discover anew the joy of physical lovemaking.

Again and again Les was carried to the heights, all but reaching the pinnacle toward which he was building, and each time Jackie would slow, would allow the pace to lessen, allow Les to drift back to earth, and then it would begin again until Les felt he could endure no more.

And then, finally, there was no withholding. His whole being became a frantic, uncontrollable culmination, lights bursting, his ears roaring. He heard the sounds of savage moaning and realized the voice was his own. All of his unhappiness, his frustration, were swept away in the flood of sensation that rushed through him.

For long moments he could only lay and gasp, savoring the lingering thrill and the discovery that he was alive again, for the first time in years. Everything was new to him, every breath, every inch of his body.

Happily, eagerly, he pulled Jackie up to him. There was only one way to express what he felt, to repay the debt he owed to this awesome, unfathomable young man.

* * * *

Les had lost all awareness of time. They might have been together in the bed for an eternity or only minutes. But somewhere in the distance a clock chimed. Jackie heard it too, and he felt his companion stir in his arms. It was late. Les would like to have remained where they were, to continue to forget that the world beyond this room existed. But it did exist and it was calling them back.

"I think it's late enough to try to find that airport," he said aloud. He reached for his cigarettes and lit one for each of them, handing one to Jackie.

They sat up in the bed, sitting close so that their bodies touched, and

smoked for a moment or two in silence. Finally Jackie rose, stretching his arms over his head. Sadly, Les watched him start to don his clothes. Then he rose himself and began to do the same.

Les was astonished when they emerged in to the hail to see someone seated at the top of the stairs. As they came out of the bedroom Manuel rose to smile a greeting. Les noticed, however, that the man's gun had been drawn and was only now returned to its holster.

As though reading his thoughts Jackie touched his arm lightly. “Just a precaution. For all we knew you might have been far friendlier with this organization than our reports indicated."

Les accepted the explanation. If anything he was impressed by the fact that this was not a slipshod outfit. The evening's activities might extremely dangerous. It was good to know he was with true professionals.

"Where's Shannon?” Jackie asked of Manuel. “He went downstairs,” Manuel explained. “I think the noises from your room were getting to him."

Les blushed but Jackie only shrugged it off. They descended the stairs and Manuel went toward the kitchen to get Shannon. Jackie and Les went on outside to wait. They did not wait long. They had only stepped from the door to the sidewalk outside when things started happening. Jackie did not see the car immediately; its headlights were off which was customary when driving at night in Lisbon, and it was coasting down the hill with the motor off as well. He noticed it only when the engine was turned on, coughing to life, and the car jumped forward, speeding toward them.

With his first glance, he saw the glimmer of moonlight at the window, the moonlight reflecting on the metal of a chromed gun. Moving with the lightning-fast reflexes that were essential to his work, he dived for Les, throwing him off balance. They fell to the ground together as the shots rang out.

By the time Jackie had scrambled again to a kneeling position and was up drawn his derringer, the car was too far away, racing down the hill. “Try,” he swore softly and turned back to Les. The pilot was holding one hand over his shoulder and the fingers of his hand were already red with flowing blood.

"They got you,” Jackie said, bending close.

Les forced a pale grin. “Not as well as they'd have liked, thanks to you. It's only a surface wound."

Manuel and Shannon burst through the door, guns drawn. “What's all the fireworks?” Shannon demanded, taking in the now empty street.

"Things are getting warm,” Jackie told him. Manuel bent down and examined Les's wound also.

"Nothing serious,” he announced, “but we'd better clean it up and put a bandage on it.” They helped Les up and led him back into the house. Manuel proved efficient as a doctor, cleaning and dressing the wound skillfully.

"They must have been keeping an eye on you,” Jackie said as he handed a cigarette to Les. “They saw you leave the bar with me and probably recognized me from Los Angeles. They've been waiting since then to get a crack at you."

"It proves one thing,” Shannon said. “They know he's valuable to us, which means we're on the right track."

"It also means you'll have to draw us a map to find that airport,” Jackie told Les.

"Like hell,” Les snorted, wincing slightly as the bandage was drawn tight. “Now I'm mad. Those jokers can't take pot shots at me and not answer for it. We're going to that airport as soon as your friend here is finished."

"It's dangerous,” Jackie warned him, but he had seen the look of fierce determination in the other's face. He knew Les was not going to be dissuaded.

"Don't worry about me,” Les insisted. “This isn't going to slow me down. And if you can come up with an extra gun I'll show you how well I can shoot left-handed."

Jackie glanced at Manuel, telling him silently that, as the doctor, it was up to him. For an answer Manuel handed his own revolver to Les.

"Try this one,” he said simply. “I've got a spare in the car."

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Chapter 9

It was a long drive, and a slow one. It was necessary to stop at several crossroads while Les studied the area before choosing the right way. Once he decided they were on the wrong road and they had to retrace their route.

There was always the possibility, Jackie was aware, that they might not be able to find the spot at all. Too, he was more worried about Les than he would have cared to admit. He could go along with Manuel's diagnosis that the wound was not a serious one, but he also knew that any wound could seriously impair a man's ability in a tight situation. The situation into which they were racing might be a very tight one. If the going got rough, Les might be more of a handicap than a help.

"Hold it," Les interrupted a lengthy silence. "Pull over here."

Manuel did as instructed, driving the car cautiously from the narrow dirt road, scarcely more than a track, into the field that bordered it.

"I think this is it," Les said after a moment's consideration. "If I remember correctly it's just over that hill there."

Manuel switched off the motor and they got out, moving quickly toward a growth of brush nearby. In the protective shadows that it provided from the moonlight, they paused to consider the situation.

A grove of trees began halfway up the hill. It would give them the cover they needed to make an approach. Jackie led the way, moving rapidly, but stooped. When he reached the grove he paused again until the others had joined him. Then, moving from tree to tree, they continued up the hill.

At first sight it seemed as though Les had been mistaken. The other side of the hill seemed little different rom the side they had just come up. There were other small clusters of trees, leading down into the flat valley between the hills, a valley that appeared lush with greenery and small shrubs.

As though reading Jackie's thoughts, Les touched his arm and pointed toward one of the groves. Jackie looked more closely and then he saw that the trees were only a cover for a long, low building. And the bare

valley, he saw too, was a fake as well. As he stared at it he could make out the runway, long and flat, but its surface had been cleverly painted to create the illusion of greenery and growth.

"Any idea how many people we can expect to run into?" he asked Les in a whisper.

"Hard to say. They had a full crew when we landed, of course, but I don't think this is the headquarters."

There was only one way to find out just what was below—that was by going there. Crouching low and moving carefully from cover to cover, they made their way down the hill.

"The hangar's at the other end of the runway," Les informed them, pointing in that direction, where they could now make out another, camouflaged building.

"You two take that one," Jackie instructed Shannon and Manuel.

"If the plane's there, put it out of commission. If nothing else is accomplished we'll at least slow down their export-import activities."

"Where will you be?" Shannon asked.

Jackie nodded in the direction of the main building. "I doubt that they have any of the boys here, but there may be records or people who can tell us how to find them."

"We'll give you twenty minutes," Manuel said, checking his watch. Jackie nodded and waited with Les as Shannon and Manuel started off. He watched until they had reached the edge of the runway, skirting it to make their way toward the hangar.

"Okay, let's go," he told Les. They too started off, in the direction of the other building.

Shannon and Manuel were nearly to the hangar before they encountered the guard. It was necessary for them to cross an open, dangerously unprotected area to reach it. They paused and Manuel raised himself to start across when Shannon caught his arm in a fierce grip and pointed.

Manuel raised his eyebrows in silent thanks and stooped again. From a holster hidden beneath his shirt he withdrew a thin, deadly looking throwing knife. They dared not speak because of the nearness of the

guard, but Shannon understood the silent gestures. He crawled away, circling the area where the guard stood, until the guard was between himself and Manuel. Here, too, Shannon was in the open, a sitting duck. He would have to depend upon Manuel's skill with the knife. To risk shooting now could bring all hell down upon them, and upon Jackie and Les as well.

He stood, making himself deliberately conspicuous, and kicked a small stone with his foot. The guard heard and whirled, his rifle lifting to his shoulder. He wasn't waiting to ask questions—he had seen Shannon and he meant to shoot. Shannon raised his revolver automatically but it wasn't necessary. The guard seemed to freeze suddenly and then, with only a soft groan, toppled forward. Manuel's knife had found its mark.

They joined each other again and moved swiftly and silently to the hangar. It was locked, but the knife that Manuel had taken time to retrieve made short work of the lock.

The plane was there all right, sitting ominously in the darkness. They exchanged grim smiles. Now all they had to do was put it out of commission, permanently. Shannon already had an idea for that.

Nearby, in the shadow of the hangar, he had noticed another small building, plainly a storage shed. It was his guess they would find fuel there. Nodding for Manuel to follow him, he led the way to the shed. That lock was just as vulnerable to Manuel's knife as the other one had been, and they found their fuel all right, including two large barrels of gasoline. Together they managed to carry one of them to the hangar, placing it directly under the wings of the plane, where its own fuel tanks would be.

They opened the second barrel, pouring the gasoline about the closed container, over the floor of the hangar, and finally making a trail out of the hangar. Manuel hastily removed his shirt and soaked it with the last of the gasoline. He tied the shirt tightly about a piece of wood to create a makeshift torch. Once ignited it would burn fiercely.

They glanced at their watches. Jackie had five minutes to go. Shannon removed his cigarette lighter from his pocket and held it ready while they waited.

Jackie stopped again a short distance from the building they were approaching and seated himself on the ground. While Les watched, at first puzzled and then amazed, Jackie removed his shoes. The heels

and soles of both proved to be hollow, opening to reveal hidden compartments. From them Jackie removed the equipment he felt they would need. From one of them, two pieces fitted together to form a small throwing knife similar to the one Manuel had carried. There was also a small, thin but strong wire. Finally there were two small capsules. Separately the ingredients in them were harmless. Mixed together they produced a powerful explosive that could be detonated on impact.

He was ready now to tackle the building in front of them. Leaving his shoes behind on the ground, he motioned for Les to follow him and started off again.

There was a guard at the corner of the building, standing so close to the wall that they were almost upon him before they saw him. Fortunately he had not yet seen them. His back was to them.

Jackie wrapped the ends of the wire about his hands, holding the length of it between. Moving without a sound in his bare feet, he crept up behind the guard. He lifted his hands and brought them down over the guard's head. In one swift movement he had twisted the wire about the guard's throat. The man struggled wildly, but with his breath caught he was unable to throw off Jackie. He sank to the ground.

The way was now clear to the entrance. They moved stealthily forward. It was impossible to guess what might await them beyond the door. There were no windows, only ventilating shafts high up that indicated the building was air-conditioned. They would have to go in by the door.

Jackie glanced at his watch. They had less than ten minutes in which to act. He tried the door and found it locked. The thin blade of the knife fitted into the lock. He worked for a moment before he heard the click as the lock gave. Gun ready, he pushed the door open.

The hallway onto which the door opened was empty but brilliant with light. The doors along its length were closed except for one almost at the other end, half open. From this door there was a low mumble of voices. They inched their way along the hail, toward the sound.

They could not see into the room from where they stood outside the door, but the opening permitted them to hear the conversation. Les stiffened as he heard his own name mentioned.

"We should have killed him when we landed," the speaker was saying.

“Or kept him here until we needed him again."

"He would never be able to find his way back here,” someone insisted.

"We can't take that chance. I'm going to start clearing things up. We can round up the boys by morning and get them all in one house. If things get risky we can take them all to Marakesh."

"Fine. I'll keep the plane ready, just in case."

Jackie smiled as he thought of Shannon and Manuel. If their efforts were successful the plane wouldn't be going anywhere. But his interest was quickly returned to the men in the room. The speaker, obviously, was the boss. He was planning on leaving soon to return to the city, where he would be gathering together their victims. If only they could follow him, give him time to get the boys together, and then strike.

His heart sank as the head man crossed his line of vision. Jackie recognized him as the one who had escaped in Los Angeles, taking Pepe with him. But he also saw that the man was leaving already, by another door.

"Remember,” the chief was saying, “contact me only if something goes wrong. Otherwise I'll be back in two days, as planned.” With that he was gone. There was no possibility of following him and he was plainly the one they wanted. From outside they heard the sound of a car starting up and driving away.

There were two possibilities, Jackie decided, his mind racing. They could leave without causing any trouble. They would have two days in which to work and try to find where the boys were in the city. But Shannon and Manuel were at the hangar and his watch told him he would not have time left to reach them and stop them from taking action.

The only other solution was to see to it that the men here had no opportunity of warning the one who had left. They would have to take them prisoners, or...?

The question was answered for him. There was a shout from the hail behind them. Jackie and Les both whirled about, to discover that another guard had entered the building behind them. As they turned he raised his gun to fire. Les was faster. His aim was as accurate as he had promised. The man fell forward on the floor.

The alarm had been sounded, however. There was a crashing of chairs

from the room outside which they stood. Jackie aimed and fired, not at the door but at the overhead light. The hall was plunged into almost total darkness.

He paused for only a moment, to throw the knife as a figure appeared in the door. That man fell too. But he didn't know how many others there were in the room and any one of them might be able to warn the chief when he reached Lisbon. Grimly Jackie lifted the capsule in his hand and hurled it through the door. No one from that room, he thought as he dashed down the hall after Les, would be able to sound an alarm. The explosion rocked the building and sent Jackie to the floor.

Les, too, had fallen. He was getting weak, Jackie realized. He scrambled to his feet and helped Les up. He had just reached for the gun where it lay on the floor when the other guard appeared in the door, almost on top of them.

Jackie dived for the gun. Even as he was rolling he fired, aiming blindly for the doorway. The bullet found his mark but a second too late. The guard had fired as well. He and Les fell together.

It wasn't necessary to take Les's pulse. The bullet had shattered his handsome face, fired as it was at close range. Jackie bit his lip and fought back the tears.

"So long, handsome," he whispered. It was just one more score he had to settle with his enemies. The score was adding up big.

There was a brilliant flash of light from outside and seconds later an explosion that rocked the ground. The plane, Jackie knew. Manuel and Shannon had done their job. Their work here was finished. The rest of it would take place in Lisbon, within the next two days.

He lifted Les's body from the floor, swinging it heavily over his shoulders. Dead or not, he did not intend to leave him here with the scavengers they had killed. Bending under his weight, he stumbled out the door.

The night was bright with the fire from the hangar. By the time the fire burned itself out there would be little left of the plane or the equipment that had been there. He stared off in the direction of the hill, where Manuel and Shannon would be waiting for him.

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Chapter 10

It was morning by the time they arrived back in the city. Arrangements had to be made regarding Les, and Manuel offered to take over that responsibility through the local CAMP. office. Jackie and Shannon returned to the house and a few hours sleep.

It was mid-afternoon when Jackie awoke and made his way downstairs to the kitchen. Manuel was already there, with coffee and delicious rolls. Shannon joined them in a few minutes. “Any ideas?” Shannon asked when he had seated himself at the table with his coffee.

"Only one,” Jackie answered. “We know the boys, at least quite a few of them, are still in Lisbon, and that right now they're being gathered together in one place, probably a stud-house of some sort. We've got to find that house."

"There are many such places in Lisbon,” Manuel informed them. “Some of them have been in operation for many years, others come and go."

"I think our best bet would be the newer ones,” Jackie decided. “Manuel, you get the names of those and arrange for us to get inside as tourists. Shannon and I will separate and check them out until we find the right one."

"There's just one thing that worries me,” Shannon said thoughtfully. “What happens if I end up with one of the employees? They'll expect me to perform."

"So they will,” Jackie agreed, without further comment. His attitude made it plain that such a problem would be Shannon's, to solve as best he could. After all, he knew exactly what he himself would do in such a situation.

Manuel had returned by evening with the information they needed. Where possible he had passed the word, through safe channels, that an American tourist would be calling upon the house involved. There were more than a dozen addresses. Jackie and Shannon divided them evenly.

"When the right house is found," Jackie said before they set out, "there may not be an opportunity to contact the others. We'll have to both play it by ear, but remember that these fellows play dirty."

"So can I," Shannon reminded him, and this was one time he would not hesitate to do so.

If Shannon had no fear of facing danger, however, this was one assignment in which there were other things he feared. The prospect that he might find himself involved in a homosexual sex scene was somewhat unnerving. Not, he had to admit to himself, that he wasn't in a mood for sex. He had been without that far too long for comfort.

Still, he wasn't at all sure he could perform with another male, although the more he was exposed to it and the longer he was forced to light go without the relief of normal sex, the less resistance he felt to the matter.

"At this rate," he told himself glumly, "I'll end up taking Jackie up one of his offers."

He thought about his companion agent. One thing was certain whatever Jackie did in bed he must do it quite well. From what Shannon had seen the ones he did it with were invariably well satisfied when it was over. Les, after his session with Jackie the night before, had looked like a man who had just stuffed himself at a banquet.

Maybe he had, Shannon decided. He didn't ponder the question further however, because the taxi in which he was riding had arrived point the first of the addresses.

He felt most peculiar explaining to the madam who ran the house that he wanted a boy. What he had not counted on was that many of the houses were ordinary houses with women employees were only a sideline to satisfy the whims of peculiar customers.

The madam was surprised by his request gratefully he acknowledged that he must not look the type. He watched with concealed regret while she ushered out of the room the girls she had brought in for him to inspect. He even contemplated taking a little time out, but that would disprove his interest in boys. With a sigh he waited for her to bring in the male talent she had available.

Finally she brought five different fellows into the room. It took only a glance to convince Shannon that none of them were Americans. "No

more?” he asked of the madam. “Maybe a blond?"

"No blonds,” she answered, shaking her head sadly. “But all of these boys are very nice. José, come here."

Before Shannon could protest, José was standing in front of him or rather, over him. José straddled Shannon's lap so that his crotch was virtually in Shannon's face.

"Feel,” the madam insisted. Without waiting for him to do it himself, she took Shannon's hand and put it on the boy's body, encouraging him to examine the goods.

Shannon felt, hoping that his red face wasn't too obvious in the dim light. Worse, the young man was responding rapidly to the touch. Shannon half-expected the trousers to be removed right then and there. “Very nice,” he managed to stammer. “But I had my mind set on a blond."

"No blonds.” The madam was plainly annoyed by his lack of interest in the local talent.

It was with genuine relief that Shannon paid her for her trouble and went on to the next house.

Things at his next address, however, were even touchier. His request for a blond produced a smile. “Come with me,” this madam instructed. Shannon followed her up a creaking flight of stairs. She pointed to one door. “Blond there,” she informed him. “You pay now, fifty escudos please."

Shannon gulped but produced the fifty escudos. The madam pointed again to the door and left him there, making her way noisily back down the stairs.

The one in the room was blond all right, and young, damn cute little thing, in fact, Shannon had to admit to himself. The young man was stark naked, reclining on a bed. He jumped up as Shannon entered the room and closed the door after himself.

"Are you American?” Shannon asked quickly.

The boy shook his head. “Swedish,” he answered with a slight accent. “But I am very nice."

"I don't doubt it,” Shannon told him, taking a step back as the boy

approached him. “But I think I've changed my mind. Thanks anyway."

"You're going?” The boy practically wailed as Shannon reached for the doorknob. “But they'll beat me if I dissatisfy you."

"But you haven't dissatisfied me,” Shannon insisted. The young man was punctuating his argument by standing practically on top of him and rubbing his body against Shannon's. To the agent's discomfort he found his body responding mechanically to the stimuli. “And stop that,” he added, holding the boy at arm's length.

"They'll beat me,” the boy wailed again and broke into sobs.

"Hey, don't cry,” Shannon said, moved. He reached out to comfort the boy without thinking. “Look, I'll stay for a while, okay?"

The boy was in his arms before he could move away. “I'll make you very happy,” he promised, his crying stopping magically.

Shannon managed to free himself from the embrace again, although not without feeling his blood temperature rising. “Only if you stay over there,” he stated, pointing to the bed.

He ignored the puzzled looks the boy gave him. At least the kid did as he was told and went across to the bed. Shannon remained where he was, leaning against the door to light a cigarette. This was proving to be a difficult evening.

Jackie was working on his third house. The first two had been the quickly disposed of without incident. The third one, however, had begun to look interesting almost at once. For one thing, the “madam” who greeted him was a man, an aging and lecherous-looking auntie. It was obvious that the house catered to a gay clientele. Furthermore, although it was new to the business it had been set up lavishly, with a great deal of money invested. It might have been only intuition, but it seemed to him the sort of place the kidnapping ring would have organized.

"Have you a particular type you're looking for?” the auntie asked when they were at the bar in what was intended as the parlor. “Light? Dark? Short?"

"Something blond, I think,” Jackie informed him.

The “madam's” eyes lighted up knowingly. “Ah, yes, I have just the thing. Norwegian, only twenty-five. Very popular."

Jackie frowned. “Well, I had something younger than that in mind. Perhaps something American."

The older man's smile had become somewhat cooler. “Such things are possible, of course,” he said, speaking slowly, “for a price. But it seems a hit unusual for an American like yourself to come so far, only to end up with something you could have had at home."

Jackie realized he had blundered by being so direct, but he had learned there were young American boys in the house. He'd have to go slowly, wait for an opportunity to look things over for himself.

"Maybe you're right at that,” he agreed. “Having come so far, I ought to sample the local wares. If you'll permit me a change of mind I think I'll have something dark-haired after all, a native of your own city."

His decision seemed to allay the other's suspicions. “But of course, I have just the thing.” Auntie pulled a velvet rope that hung on the wall and a bell sounded elsewhere. “Send Alvares,” he instructed the servant who answered the summons.

Under any other circumstances Jackie would have been more than satisfied with Alvares. Typically Portuguese, he was short, with the full hips and exaggerated structure of the natives. His dark hair was matched by his wide eyes and the handsomely molded face was nearly the shade of bronze, made to appear even darker by the stark whiteness of the open-front shirt and the trousers that he wore.

He greeted Jackie with a sultry smile. “Good evening,” he said, with only a slight accent. “You wish to come with me, yes?"

"Yes, indeed,” Jackie answered. He paid the “madam” the price quoted expensive merchandise, he thought and joined Alvares, who was patiently waiting for him.

As he went with Alvares, however, his intuition was still at work. He wanted badly to look over this house and in order to do that he would have to temporarily dispose of Alvares, so that no warning think could be given. As they entered the room to which Alvares led him, Jackie removed a handkerchief from his pocket. Pretending to blow his nose, he twisted the top of his large ring, covering it quickly with the handkerchief. The liquid inside poured into the cloth. Alvares had turned his back. With a quick movement Jackie stepped to him and reached around to thrust the handkerchief over the boy's face. He struggled for only a moment before the powerful, fast-acting potion had taken effect, and then he fell unconscious.

"Sorry, you lovely thing, you," Jackie said, pausing to look down at the splendid creature on the floor, "but Daddy has work to do."

He made his way back down the stairs toward the parlor, careful to avoid being seen. In the parlor, the "madam" was with another customer. Jackie stepped close to the door of the room, in time to hear the instructions she gave the servant.

"Prepare one of the Americans for our guest," she ordered.

Jackie smiled eagerly. Now he'd have a chance to see the American merchandise. And he was curious, too, to see just how they "prepared" the boys. He stood in a doorway until the servant had started down the hall. Then, moving cautiously from doorway to doorway, Jackie followed him.

The servant was leading him to the basement of the house, which proved to be as elegantly turned out as the rest of the house. Here, however, the lights were even dimmer, except for the small squares of light at each of the doors off the long hall. Jackie waited until the servant had unlocked one of the rooms and gone inside before he started down the hall.

He paused at the first door and looked through the small window in it. His excitement grew—the boy inside the room, apparently asleep now, was blond, all right. More important, Jackie recognized him as one of the kidnap victims whose photograph had been in the report.

He had found the right place then. The door, of course, was locked, but he already knew that the servant had the keys. He moved down to the door that the servant had entered. He glanced through Ran the window in time to see the man giving the youth a glass of something to drink. The youth was reluctant at first but finally he drank, draining the glass at the servant's insistence.

The transformation was incredible. The American, for Jackie had recognized this one also, fell back across the bed, breathing heavily. Without even being touched he was becoming physically aroused and finally began to handle himself, writhing and tossing on the bed.

An aphrodisiac, Jackie realized, and a powerful one, obviously. That explained why it was that the boys, although here against their wills, would successfully entertain the customers that were brought to them. By the time the customer arrived this kid would be nothing more than an animal, living solely for sexual lust.

The servant was returning to the hall. Jackie pressed himself against the wall where he would be hidden by the opening door. He waited until the man had started away from him before he struck. One karate chop was all it took to lay him out cold. Jackie looked around for some place to hide the unconscious man and finally settled on a closet.

Keys in hand, he made his way back down the hall, glancing in each of the windows. Most of the boys were here, all right. In some of the rooms there were several boys, probably the ones who had been moved to the house the same day. There was no sign of Pepe, however.

He paused for a second look at one of the windows. The youth inside the room was lying on his bed, toying with himself, but without the frenzy Jackie had witnessed in the other boy. This one, he concluded, had probably been given the stimulant earlier and it was now almost worn off.

It was not the activity, however, that had arrested his attention, but rather the area of the activity. He stared for a moment yes, there was no doubt of it, it was the same as the photos Rosarita Beech had shown him. Pepe might not be here but he had found Ramon. Without hesitation he unlocked the door and stepped inside the room, closing the door after himself.

Ramon did not know him, of course. The boy was literally in a state of exhaustion, but he listened to Jackie's hurried explanation of who he was and why he was there. The realization that escape was at hand was the stimulant the boy needed to restore his energies.

"Then we can go away from this place?" he asked as though he could not believe it.

"Yes," Jackie assured him, "but first there are things that I must do here and I'll need your help. We have to help the other boys to escape also. What's more, I have to take the head of this operation as a prisoner. Not all of the boys are here in Lisbon and I'll need him to tell me where the others can be found."

"I'll help you," Ramon said eagerly. He stood and as he did so, Jackie was reminded that the young man was still quite nude. It was a splendid costume, of course, but hardly the costume for running about the streets of Lisbon.

"I don't suppose they left you with any clothes?" he asked, taking

advantage of the opportunity to admire Ramon's loveliness.

"Not a thing, but I know where they were stored when we were brought into the house. We can get them."

"Let's start with that," Jackie decided. He went to the door but it did not open. "I don't remember locking it again when I came in," he said, looking over the keys in his hand for the right one.

"You didn't, my dear." The voice came from overhead. Jackie turned and looked up to see the small speaker near the ceiling. "It's been locked electronically," the voice explained. "Very careless of you, I must say. Surely you must have realized that we would allow ourselves the means of listening in on our boys, just in case of trouble."

Jackie groaned, realizing that the voice was right it had been careless of him. He went back to the bed. The listening device was not hard to find; they had not considered it necessary to hide it well. Cursing himself silently, he ripped it out. They wouldn't be able to listen to any more conversations, but the damage had already been done. He was now a prisoner in this room, the same as Ramon.

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Chapter 11

"Taxi, sir?"

Shannon had almost declined the offer, absorbed as he was in his own thoughts, before he realized that it was Manuel holding open the door of his cab.

"Yes, thank you," he responded, climbing into the car. They continued to act as strangers to each other until they were away from the curb and moving into traffic.

"Any luck?" Manuel asked finally.

"Not a thing," Shannon answered. He had checked all but one of the houses on his list, and except for some embarrassing situations, nothing had seemed out of the way to him. "But what brings you by? Something happening?"

"I'm not sure," Manuel said. "The office is picking up a faint signal from a homing device—the sort that is hidden sometimes in the thumbnail."

"Pepe," Shannon exclaimed. "It must be."

"We don't know who it is," Manuel admitted honestly. "I was able to follow the signal to the general area that it's coming from, but there was no one there I recognized. Ordinarily the signal would enable me to pick out the exact person, but this one is just too weak to be certain. It's either been damaged by an accidental blow of some sort or else it's lost power."

"But we've got to find him. Where...?"

"I'm taking you there now," Manuel answered the question before it was even completed. "I was hoping perhaps you could identify the person wearing the device. Mind you, it may not be your Pepe. It might very well be someone you don't know either."

"The signal isn't by any chance coming from one of the houses, is it?" If that were the case, it would lead them right to the place they were seeking.

Manuel shook his head. “No, that's why I questioned that it was the one you're expecting. This is coming from Edouard VII Park, the big park in the heart of the city."

Shannon puzzled that one as they rode. If the signal was coming from a park it meant one of two things. Either Pepe had somehow escaped or the signal wasn't coming from Pepe. In either case, he'd know soon. They were approaching a large park.

"It this it?” he asked.

"Yes.” Manuel followed the street that circled about the park. Finally he pulled to the curb. “This is as close as I can pinpoint it,” he said. “The signal is coming from somewhere up there."

Shannon followed his pointing finger. At first the scene was a little puzzling. There was a slight hill, atop which a line of men stood before a blank wall. It was the openness of the scene that prevented his immediately recognizing it for what it was. The area was brightly lit and conspicuous, sitting on top of the hill as it was. It was a moment before he realized what the men were doing there. Then one of the men stepped back from the wall. He was still tucking himself into his trousers as he turned and started away.

"It's a toilet,” Shannon said loudly, in a shocked voice. It was the most public toilet he had ever seen. “A pisser."

Manuel seemed not to comprehend his surprise. “Yes, of course."

"You mean I've got to go up there and look for someone among all those guys taking a leak?"

"Of course.” Manuel handed him a small device. “This is a receiver. It's possible that it will help you. The signal you get, which will feel like a pulse in your hand, should get stronger as you get closer to the sender. But as I warned you, the signal is quite faint. When I tried myself I got almost nothing."

Shannon sighed wearily. This case was certainly the most unusual one he had ever worked on. But Manuel was waiting, obviously impatient. Shannon opened the door and got out.

"I have other things I must do,” Manuel said. “I will return here soon. If you are not here then I will return to the house, all right?"

"Sure,” Shannon said without enthusiasm. He watched the taxi pull

away. There was no way to avoid it. He followed the path up the hill toward the wall. The men there, of course, were coming and going regularly, although some of them lingered. He didn't need anyone to tell him why they were hanging around.

He could feel the signal that Manuel had described, just a slight pulsing of the device in his hand, and it was faint. He walked slowly along the wall, as close to the men lined up there as possible, pausing several times to see if he could determine any change in the signal.

"I say," one of the men at the wall, obviously an Englishman, said to him. "Aren't you being a little choosy about picking a spot? One end is the same as another, you know."

"I'm fussy," Shannon told him curtly. "Only the right place will do." He moved on before the man could engage him in further conversation, and in order to make himself less conspicuous, he stepped up to the wall himself. It might be less embarrassing if he seemed to have legitimate business there.

He wasn't very successful in the pretense, however. In the first place, he just didn't have to do anything. In the second place, even if he had had to do anything, it was doubtful he could have done so under the circumstances. He felt as though he were on display which, in fact, he was. He was fully aware of the fact that he was in plain sight of the people strolling by on the sidewalk below. All he could do was just stand there.

Just standing at a public trough, however, without doing anything, was an act that was bound to make his intentions seem other than they should be. And the young man beside him had obviously made up his own mind as to why Shannon was there.

"Hsst."

Shannon jumped and looked in the direction of the sound. His eyes widened as the man beside him shook himself and gestured unmistakably. "You want to play? Only twenty escudos."

"No, thanks," Shannon snapped, zipping up his fly quickly. He moved on, ignoring the disgruntled look he had earned, and decided on another spot, this one between two American servicemen. Changing places, however, only made his actions that much more conspicuous. He had hardly stepped up to the wall when one of the Americans glowered at him.

"Beat it, buddy," he growled. "I don't swing that route."

"I'm just doing my business," Shannon whispered angrily, wondering how the hell he had ever gotten into this situation.

"Yeh? What was wrong with doing it where you were standing before?"

"I didn't like the guy next to me." This was certainly the silliest argument he had ever gotten himself into.

"That's what I mean."

"Now wait a minute, I have every right to go wherever I choose."

"I don't see you doin' nothing."

That was a fact, Shannon had to admit. "Well, how can I?" he protested. "I haven't had time, what with arguing with you."

"Hey look," the sailor on Shannon's other side interrupted the discussion, "if you guys want to have a summit meeting why don't you go someplace else? You're distracting me."

"Distracting you?" Shannon was so upset by this time that he forgot he really didn't have to do anything. Anyway, all of the conversation was having its effect—he really did have to go by now and he couldn't for all the distraction. "I'm the one who's being distracted."

Another sailor had walked up to the one who was protesting the distraction. "Hey, Jack," he greeted his friend. "What's keeping you? I thought you was only gonna be a minute."

"It's these two guys here, talking up a storm. I can't concentrate."

"Yeah?" The sailor looked Shannon and the marine over. "You two old friends?"

"Nah," the marine protested loudly. "This guy was just trying to pick me up, that's all."

"I was not," Shannon practically wailed.

"Can't say I blame you; he's no prize," the sailor commented. "Say, look, you wanta make out? How about my buddy or me? We could both use a little action, say for maybe five bucks?"

The young Portuguese man who had propositioned Shannon earlier had joined the group by this time. “Twenty escudos,” he told Shannon, clutching himself meaningfully. “Much cheaper than American sailors."

"What do you mean?” the marine demanded angrily of the sailor. “You wouldn't blame him for not wanting to pick me up? Who's no prize?"

"Maybe he don't like marines,” the sailor explained. “Can't blame him for that."

The marine snorted loudly and angrily. “Well I'll be,” he exclaimed, turning on Shannon. “Are you saying you don't like marines, buddy?"

"I didn't say any such thing,” Shannon wailed. In his excitement he had forgotten that he was still out of his trousers and he turned away from the wall. “I love the marines."

"You see,” the marine said triumphantly, thumbing his nose at the sailor. “Look, tell you what, I'll take you on for half what those guys wanted, okay?"

"No!” In his excitement Shannon lost control; he finally started what he hadn't been able to do facing the wall.

"Hey, what the hell ...?" The sailor yelled as his leg was suddenly in the wrong spot.

"Okay, you guys,” the sailor still facing the wall yelled. “I told you, I can't go with all this commotion."

"Sorry,” Shannon apologized, trying to turn around to the wall. The marine had found the previous mishap extremely funny. Now he was caught in the line of fire. It was the sailor's turn to roar with laughter.

"What's so funny?” the marine demanded, his face purple with anger.

"You, you big ape,” the sailor laughed on. “That's what he thinks of your proposition."

The group was growing. This time it was the Englishman who had spoken previously to Shannon who walked up. “I say,” he addressed Shannon. “You did strike gold, didn't you! I don't suppose you'd care to let me in on the party."

"No. Beat it,” Shannon snapped. For the moment, he was

concentrating on the conclusion of his business as quickly as possible, so that he could get out of here.

"Well, you needn't be stingy; you can't take care of them all by yourself, you know."

The marine, meanwhile, had decided he didn't like the sailor's laughter. And he had established this fact by landing a giant fist on the sailor's jaw. The sailor fell against Shannon, pushing him into the wall. The result was that Shannon was now drenched as well.

Jack, the sailor still at the wall, whirled about when the fight started and in the excitement, lost his modesty. This time they were all in the line of fire.

"Jove," the Englishman shouted. "You Americans have the damnedest idea of sport."

At that moment Shannon remembered the device in his hand. It was throbbing harder now, more insistently. "I'm getting the signal now," he exclaimed aloud in his excitement.

"I got a little of it myself" the Englishman said. "I still think it's weird. Do you really enjoy that sort of thing?"

Before Shannon could answer one of the sailors had managed to punch him in the nose, purely because he hadn't been able to land a blow on the other two combatants.

"Well, I never," the Englishman snorted. "I'll admit he has peculiar tastes, but that's no reason to beat the man." With that he lifted his umbrella and brought it down over the sailor's head.

It was at this precise moment that Pepe arrived on the scene, walking up the path to the wall. "Mr. Shannon," he exclaimed, recognizing Shannon at once.

"Pepe!" Shannon ducked around the combatants and grabbed Pepe up in his arms.

The fighting came to an abrupt stop. "Hey," one of the sailors exclaimed. "He goes for kids."

"Then what in the hell were you trying to pick me up for?" the marine demanded angrily.

"I'll explain it all to you later," Shannon said hurriedly. "Let's go," he said to Pepe. With the youngster close behind him, Shannon beat a hasty retreat down the hill to the sidewalk.

"Mr. Shannon."

"We'll talk later," Shannon told him, not slowing his pace. "Right now I just want to get away from those lunatics."

"Mr. Shannon ...?" Pepe tugged at his arm.

"I told you..."

"Mr. Shannon," Pepe insisted, "I think you'd better put it away. And close up your trousers."

* * * *

They found one of the many sidewalk cafes that dotted the Avenida da Liberdade and restored their spirits with coffee. Shannon drank his while Pepe described his adventures.

He had, as they had known, been taken to a plane. There had been two or three other boys on the same plane but all of them, Pepe included, had been drugged. When he had awakened, Pepe found himself in a strange house. They were just being taken in, still asleep, left lying in the living room while the others were carried in. Pepe pretended that he was still asleep also, and when their guards had gone out for another boy he simply slipped from the room and escaped from the house by a back door.

"I didn't know where I was," he said, "and I was afraid that they might find me and take me back, so I've been hiding, mostly around the park. I knew that eventually you and Jackie would find me and that seemed to me like a logical place for Jackie to look for me."

"But how have you stayed alive?" Shannon was astonished that the young boy before him could have fared so well on his own, in a strange city, in a foreign country.

"Well, that was another reason for staying around the park," Pepe explained unashamedly. "I managed to earn a little money each night."

Shannon had forgotten that the innocent-looking boy had been raised as a professional—chances are he might have taught the local people a

trick or two.

"I see," was all he said. He thought for a long moment. "This house you escaped from, can you lead me to it?"

"Oh, yes. It's not far from here, in fact."

Shannon considered the situation. He had no way of knowing just where Jackie might be at the moment and time was of the essence in their search. He would have to go to the house alone and count on Jackie and Manuel showing up in time to give him assistance.

"Let's go," he said, deciding. Anyway, this would be one time that he was ahead of Jackie.

They walked, Pepe leading the way with confidence. It was no more than a fifteen-minute walk to the house, a relatively new-looking and large building.

"This is the one," Pepe explained, stopping at the wall that encircled the house. "Just over the wall in the rear is a window into the kitchen. It was open when I left."

"I'll try that route," Shannon agreed. He found a slip of paper and wrote on it the address of the house they had been using in Lisbon.

"You go here," he told Pepe, giving him the address and the key to the house. "There'll be a man called Manuel. Explain to him who you are and then tell him where I am. Tell him to get here on the double."

He also gave Pepe some money for a taxi, and waited to see the youngster safely on his way. Then, drawing his gun, he circled about lit the house to the rear.

The window was just below the wall all right, only inches from the wall in fact. Shannon, climbing over the wall, put one foot down. It landed on the sill and slid. Without ceremony, Shannon fell over the wall and through the window. He landed not quite on the basket of fish, only hitting the edge.

The result was that the basket was flipped into the air. Shannon landed on the floor and seconds after, the load of fish landed on top of him.

If the situation were not already sufficiently uncomfortable, the kitchen was not unoccupied. A fat, toothless woman in a black dress

and dangly earrings had been about to start work on the fish. The knife with which she had intended to work was in her hands. For a moment Shannon suspected she was going to use it on him instead. She stood with eyes wide, mouth open, staring at the havoc he had created in her kitchen. Then with a shriek, she threw the knife into the air and ran screaming from the room. Her yells, sounding throughout the house, were sure to bring everything down on his head in addition to the fish.

Shannon scrambled to his feet, shaking off the fish, although the smell unfortunately lingered. He had to find some place to hide, and fast. There was only one door out of the kitchen, into the same hall down which the cook had run screaming. He took the first door off the hall and dived through it.

Regrettably, it too was occupied. “Jove, you again,” a familiar English voice greeted him. Shannon recognized his recent acquaintance from the park. He groaned, but he was in no position to be particular about his company.

"I've got to hide,” he said, trying to ignore the scene he had obviously interrupted between the Englishman and the young man beneath him on the bed, his legs over the Englishman's shoulders.

"Don't tell me you've started another ruckus?"

"A worse one, but there isn't time to explain. There must be something I can crawl into.” Shannon's eyes swept the room, looking for a likely place to hide.

"Well, you could certainly crawl into here,” the Englishman offered. “Offhand, I'd say we'd both fit with no difficulty."

"Thanks,” Shannon answered dryly. There was nothing in the room but a sink, a small table with a pitcher on it, and the bed. It would have to be the bed.

The other one on the bed was talking rapidly in Portuguese. “What's he saying?” Shannon asked, bending down to try to crawl under the bed.

"He's saying the price goes up for taking on two. I'm haggling with him now to get a better offer."

"Tell him I'll support him for life if he just doesn't give me away."

"I don't suppose you brought your friend with you," the Englishman asked. Shannon by this time was under the bed. "That cute little tyke from the park?"

Shannon grunted a negative. It was cramped under the bed. The way the furniture sagged, he was virtually supporting the weight of the both of them.

"Pity," the Englishman declared. "We might have worked out a trade. Oh well, might as well make do."

"Could you make do a little less while I'm under here? I think you just broke a rib."

"He didn't even wince, if I did."

"Not his, mine."

The English voice became suddenly more cheerful. "I don't suppose you'd want to change places with my friend here. He might fit under the bed better."

"I don't think I'd fit very well where he is."

"Oh, I say," the Englishman exclaimed as the door burst open. From his position under the bed Shannon could see several pairs of shoes. "Just like a bloody underground station, this place is. Go away, I'm not finished."

He punctuated the command with a jab that winded Shannon. His partner, inspired by the burst of ardor, bounced into action. Shannon bit his lip to keep from groaning. The searchers left, the door slamming shut.

"Can you pause for a second?" Shannon whispered hoarsely.

"I truly am sorry," the Englishman panted, without slowing his efforts, "but I don't think it's going to be possible at the moment. Things are too far gone, don't you see."

Shannon did see, or rather, feel. It was the most painful culmination he had ever shared with anyone the only one, in fact, he had ever shared by proxy.

It was over finally. The weight shifted and he was able to crawl to freedom.

"You're not going?" his friend asked from the bed as Shannon started for the door. "I think I've got this chap talked into a half-price sale."

"Why don't you just go ahead and enjoy my half?" Shannon suggested. He reached the door and stepped into the hall and right into the sights of a gun, aimed at the door.

"The party's over," the man behind the gun stated simply, holding it steadily aimed at Shannon's chest.

Shannon let his own gun drop to the floor. "It's been a real ball," he commented.

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Chapter 12

Jackie and Ramon heard the ruckus overhead that began when the cook ran screaming down the hall. “What is it?” Ramon asked.

"Hard to say—unless Shannon...?” Jackie listened, hoping in one instant that it was Shannon and then knowing that if it were, his entrance had been anything but successful.

"Shannon?"

"My partner,” Jackie explained. “At least, on this case he is."

"From the way you say the name he is your lover, yes?” Ramon's eyes brightened at the romantic prospect.

"He is my lover, no,” Jackie corrected him. “Unfortunately."

Ramon shrugged. “You are perhaps too honest."

"Too honest?"

"In love and in war, all things are permitted,” Ramon informed him philosophically.

"You don't know Shannon,” Jackie said. He was almost convinced the beautiful Irishman was never going to weaken and change his mind.

"You don't know Ramon,” was the reply.

Things had grown quiet again overhead. It was not much later, however, that the door to their room as suddenly opened. Jackie jumped to his feet in surprise as Shannon was shoved inside and the door quickly closed again.

"What are you doing here?” Shannon demanded, seeing Jackie.

"I was about to ask you the same thing,” Jackie replied. “And what really happened to you?” Shannon's appearance was a far cry from his usually neat attire.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you,” Shannon said. He spotted a pitcher of water and a glass on the small table. Crossing to it, he

poured himself a tall glass and drank it down. It had been a warming evening.

"Oh, dear." It was Ramon who had spoken. Shannon looked up to see the youth's eyes wide, staring at him.

"What's wrong?" Shannon demanded. He could hardly imagine anything else being wrong.

"That was the potion," Ramon said, pointing at the pitcher.

"Potion?"

Jackie barely managed to suppress a grin. "They give the boys here a potion to drink, some sort of very powerful aphrodisiac, so they'll perform like wild animals."

"Oh, no!" Shannon let the glass drop from his hand. For two days he had been so desperate for sex he could hardly stand it. He had been through an evening that left him doubting his senses all he needed now was an aphrodisiac at work in his system. And the worst thing was, he could feel it already. He was growing warm and uncomfortably aware of an ache in his loins. It was more than he could bear. "Okay, you win," he told Jackie abruptly. "I give up. Do what you like."

Jackie shook his head. "Oh no, not after all the overtures you turned down from me. You needn't think I'm going to have pity on you now."

"Oh for Pete's sake, I can't help it. This stuff is working already. I'm liable to explode."

Jackie was stubbornly silent. With a groan, Shannon threw himself across the bed. It was growing worse by the second. His blood was at the boiling point. He couldn't stand it, he had to have relief.

"Jackie," he moaned, clawing at himself, "please, I can't stand it; I really can't."

Jackie shrugged and began to unbutton his shirt. "Oh, well, I suppose I'll have to, or you'll be screaming and clawing the walls."

Shannon was beside himself with relief. He practically ripped his own clothes from his body. He didn't care how queer it was or that Ramon would be there to watch. Anyway, it wasn't his fault, it was that damned stuff he had drunk.

He was like a wild animal when Jackie came to him on the bed. There were no preliminaries. It was urgent and demanding, a violent, affectionless seeking for release. But Jackie responded, matching the frenzy, encouraging his partner to even more ferocity.

It took only a few moments. Shannon's lunging hips moved with increasing speed, hurling themselves toward Jackie, and Jackie was ready when the end came in a whirlwind of motion.

"Again," Shannon gasped when Jackie started to leave him. "Don't stop."

"Who's stopping?" Jackie asked. He had already made up his mind what he was going to do. He lifted Shannon's muscular legs easily.

"I can't," Shannon argued, starting to squirm away from the probing touch.

"The hell you can't," Jackie told him firmly. "Tit for tat, you know unless you want me to get up from the bed now and call it quits."

That settled the argument. Shannon groaned but he didn't struggle. He was motionless at first and then he began to move, but only slightly.

"Hurt?" Jackie asked. He had no desire to inflict real pain, but he knew also that the brief, initial pain was usually followed by more pleasurable sensations.

"Yes."

Jackie paused for a moment.

"Don't stop," Shannon whispered. "I didn't say *it* hurt that badly."

Jackie laughed mentally. What Shannon hadn't said and wouldn't admit—was that he was enjoying it. But he didn't have to say so, his body was saying it for him. Shannon was learning fast and using his body to give and of course gain the maximum pleasure.

It lasted quite a while. Afterward, Jackie was more than happy to repay the favor, not once but twice. At last Shannon seemed to be satisfied. He fell back across the bed with a contented grin on his face. His expression turned to one of shock, however, when he looked up and saw Ramon helping himself to a drink from the pitcher. "Oh, no," he gasped, sitting up. "Don't tell me we're going to start another session."

Ramon grinned widely. “I must have made a mistake,” he said with innocent eyes. “This isn't the potion after all; it's only water."

Shannon sprang from the bed with a roar of anger. “You tricked me!” he shouted at Jackie.

"Not me,” Jackie answered him, unalarmed by the anger. “And anyway, what are you complaining about? You enjoyed it all, didn't you?"

That stopped him. Shannon stared at him for a moment in astonishment. “Damn, I did enjoy it. Does that mean I'm queer or something?"

"Not at all,” Jackie informed him matter-of-factly. “You just happen to like sex. And you were in need of sex tonight. The belief that you had taken an aphrodisiac merely gave your mind the excuse it needed to enjoy this kind of sex."

"Well, I'll be.” Shannon shook his head. It was true enough, once he'd given himself that excuse and let himself go, he had certainly enjoyed it. “You mean it's possible to enjoy sex well, like that and not be queer."

"Not only possible but far more common than you would ever guess. No hard feelings?” Jackie asked, a little anxiously. Now that it was over, he really did feel a little guilty at taking advantage of Ramon's joke. He had wanted Shannon, of course, but he would have preferred an honest seduction.

Shannon grinned finally, a sheepish grin. “Maybe I owe you the apology,” he said. “I've been kind of dumb, haven't I?"

"No more so than thousands of others,” Jackie said with relief. He took Shannon's hand and squeezed it warmly.

Ramon cleared his throat, breaking the mood between the two agents. “Sorry,” he apologized when they turned to him, “but we must not forget, we were planning an escape."

"So we were,” Jackie agreed. “I think it's time we got busy—at the escape."

Jackie opened the compartments of his shoes, refilled since his last experience. The knife from inside he gave to Ramon, the wire to Shannon. He himself kept the explosive capsules, mixing them

carefully together.

"This will take care of the door," he explained as he worked. "Heaven alone knows what we'll face beyond it."

Working rapidly, they turned the bed over on its side to create a protective wall. Then, kneeling behind it, Jackie hurled the capsule at the door. The explosion ripped it open and rocked the entire room.

"Let's go," Jackie said, jumping over the bed. "Remember one thing: we want the head man alive, to tell us where the other boys are."

For the moment the hall was empty, but the explosion that had freed them was certain to bring them company. With only one knife and a length of wire they would be a poor match for armed guards.

There was only one route from the basement level, up the single flight of stairs. They would have to escape up those stairs, and their only defense would be a successful offense.

"Wait here," he told his companions, "and cover me with that knife." Without waiting for them to argue, Jackie was up the stairs, two at a time. He was almost to the top when the door flew open. Jackie dived for the first man's feet. So unexpected was the move and so lightning fast, that the man scarcely knew what hit him. He was lifted in the air and flung over Jackie's body, to be sent flying down the stairs.

"Catch below," Jackie yelled. Shannon and Ramon did just that. Even as Ramon was struggling with the man for the gun, however, Shannon saw another at the top of the stairs, his gun aimed at Jackie. Ramon had seen it too. He released his hold on the man in his arms and, without even time to take aim, threw the knife. It hit the gun man in the arm but that was enough. His shot went wild and the gun fell from his hand. Behind him Ramon heard a dull groan as Shannon knocked the other gunman cold.

The stairs were clear, for the moment at least. With Shannon and Ramon close behind, Jackie dashed on for the main hall. He caught the house "madam" in a flying tackle that sent him crashing to the floor. This one, however, had no more fight left in him.

"Don't hurt me," he squealed. "I don't have a gun. I'll come along quietly."

"Where's the chief?" Jackie demanded of him, shaking the man fiercely. The fighting might have given the head man enough warning

to make his escape.

The madam seemed about to speak and then his eyes went suddenly wide. Jackie guessed the truth a split second too late. Even as he started to whirl about, a shot rang out and the gun in Ramon's hand was dropped as Ramon grabbed his arm with a yelp of pain.

It was the chief himself, his gun trained now on Jackie. “Don't move, any of you,” he snapped.

"You can't shoot all of us,” Jackie told him, undaunted. “Even if you kill me the other two will get you."

"But,” the man said with a wicked grin, “will they risk seeing you killed?"

Shannon, who had already started to move forward, stopped short at the remark. Jackie swore silently to himself. He knew the man was right, neither Ramon nor Shannon would act in a way that would get him killed.

"And now,” the chief said as he backed toward the door that led to the rear of the house, “I think I'll say good evening to you all."

Jackie tensed. It was going to be up to him to reach the man before he fired, and the gun was aimed straight for him. But it would give Shannon and Ramon the reason to act.

He prepared himself to spring as the man reached behind himself for the door, and then Jackie saw the figure beyond the door, crouched low: Pepe, on his hands and knees.

The man with the gun didn't look behind him, his eyes trained on Jackie instead. He took one step, still walking backward and fell over the boy kneeling in his path. Even as he toppled Jackie sprang. The bullet that might have ended Jackie's life was fired instead into the ceiling.

It was a brief fight. Deprived of his gun, the man was no match for Jackie's wiry strength. It took one blow to convince him that it was all over and he threw his arms protectively over his head.

"Okay, okay,” he cried. “You win."

They were just dragging the man to his feet when Manuel crashed through the front door, gun drawn. He seemed disappointed that the

fighting was all over.

"Sure could have used you earlier," Shannon told him.

"What are you doing here?" Manuel demanded of Pepe when he saw the youngster standing in Ramon's arms. "I thought I told you to wait outside."

"I came in the back way," Pepe explained, "just in case anybody needed help."

"That was dangerous," Jackie told him sternly. Then, seeing the disappointed look in the boy's eyes, he smiled warmly. "But I'm glad you did. This joker would have made good on his escape if you hadn't gotten in his way."

"I guess things are finished here," Shannon said with a note of relief in his voice. "Why don't we take this character along with us and head back for the house?"

"Hey, you are forgetting something," Ramon told him loudly.

They all turned to the youth and remembered for the first time that he was still without clothing.

"I guess you're right," Jackie admitted with a laugh, "and there's a whole basement full of boys in the same predicament. Someone will have to see to them."

Manuel's face brightened at that statement. "But you've done so much already," he said with a wide grin. "Perhaps I should take care of that part of it."

There was still, in fact, quite a lot to be taken care of. The boys had to be freed and dressed. Within the night Jackie's house was turned into a dormitory, full of excited, happy youngsters, too thrilled by the near discovery that they were now free to desire any sleep.

The head of the ring, now that the game was up, was only too happy to give them the information they desired. The locations of the other boys, some of whom had been sent to other cities about the Mediterranean, were all divulged. Manuel relayed that information to C.A.M.P. so that those boys could be rounded up as well.

It was three days later before all of the boys had been collected and returned, as rapidly as C.A.M.P. could arrange transportation, to the

United States and their homes.

Finally Jackie, Shannon, Ramon, and Pepe were on board the lavender jet, on their way swiftly across the Atlantic. It was the middle of the night when they landed in the concealed airport facilities of C.A.M.P. Jackie, feeling the strain of the case and several virtually sleepless nights, would have liked to head straight for home, but he knew that in Tijuana an old friend was waiting anxiously for news. Pepe and Ramon, too, were eager to be home, and so Jackie and Shannon drove south to the border. Their welcome was a warm one.

"I knew you'd bring them back to me," Rosarita gushed with genuine tears in her eyes. "All in one piece."

"Well, I can't guarantee that there isn't a piece or two missing," Jackie said. "But they're back at least, safely."

"You must let me reward you," Rosarita insisted. "I have the most divine señorita working for me now, I'm sure your Irish friend would just love her, and there's always Jorge."

Shannon and Jackie exchanged glances. "Maybe we'd better take a rain check," Shannon decided for them. "We're both a little exhausted."

So once again they arrived back in Los Angeles in the gray light of dawn. This time Jackie drove Shannon to his own apartment, following his companion's directions.

"How about coming up for a nightcap?" Shannon suggested when they arrived.

Jackie was tired but at the same time reluctant to end the night. The case was over and he might possibly not see Shannon again. This was one of the hardships of his work. The close association with partners created a rapport unknown to others—and yet inevitably it ended. It was like being married and divorced, over and over again.

"Love one," he said, turning off the motor and following Shannon inside.

It was a small apartment, comfortable without being frilly, obviously a man's apartment. Jackie sipped the Scotch that Shannon brought him and let his own thoughts ramble for a while.

"Mind if I ask a personal question?" Shannon said finally, interrupting

his reverie.

"Not at all."

Shannon seemed a little embarrassed about the question. “That carving you have at your place, the one with the notches ...?" Jackie smiled and nodded for him to continue. “Did I earn a notch on it?” Shannon blushed as he asked.

Jackie shook his head. “Doesn't really count. After all, you were tricked into that."

"But you weren't?"

"Me? No, I knew what I was doing, all right."

"That's what I wanted to know.” While Jackie watched, puzzled, Shannon removed his pocket knife and went to the door. The woodwork, Jackie noticed, was marred with countless small cuts.

"What's that?” he asked, looking over Shannon's shoulder.

"Notches,” Shannon answered. While Jackie watched, amused, Shannon made two more cuts. Those already there were cut horizontally. The new additions, significantly, were cut vertically.

"I can understand the difference in direction,” Jackie said, “and it's flattering to know I really was first. But why did you cut two notches?"

"Oh, that.” Shannon turned to him with an expression that was quite easy to understand. “Well, that's one for that night in Lisbon and one for tonight."

And that, Jackie decided as he set his drink aside, was the nicest way he knew of to finish up an assignment. They were in the bedroom before Shannon spoke again. The handsome Irishman was taking real pleasure in the way Jackie was admiring his body as he undressed.

"Tell me,” he said, his movements deliberately slow as he peeled his shorts down over his hips. “Can you hum anything besides the *William Tell* Overture?"

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That Very Man: An Interview with Victor J. Banis

(aka Don Holliday, Jan Alexander, Elizabeth Monterey, Lynn Benedict, Jessica Stuart, Victor Jay, Bob Michaels, J.X. Williams, Jay Vickery, Jay Symon, Anonymous, and Himself)

FABIO CLETO: First of all, I want to ask you, when and how did you conceive the C.A.M.P. novels? What were the models you drew upon?

VICTOR J. BANIS: I don't think after all these years I could say how I actually came up with the idea for the first book, *The Man from C.A.M.P.* Mostly I was having fun the entire gay world was beginning to lighten up in the early sixties, after decades of repression. And I was tweaking a few blue noses. I suppose as much as anything the C.A.M.P. books were a product of their time, for better or for worse. This was the era of well—camp, with all its stylistic exaggerations. "Nothing succeeds like excess" might well have been the motto of the time, On TV it was the era of Batman and Robin and *The Man from UN.C.L.E.,* an obvious inspiration.

FC: And the James Bond movies.

VB: Yes, indirectly in any case, as clearly they were the inspiration for the U.N.C.L.E. TV series.

FC: Did Susan Sontag play any role, with her 1964 "Notes on 'Camp"' essay?

VB: Less so, I think. I don't recall that I was particularly familiar with her work at that time. And as you know, the term "camp" was already in use among homosexuals before she popularized it. But she did bring the expression out of the closet, so to speak. So, yes, at the least she deserves some credit for the title.

FC: You said the books were a product of their time, "for better or for worse". Worse in what ways?

VB: Well, like much from that era, they seem a bit quaint today, don't you think? As an example, the high-tech gadgetry Jackie used his seems decidedly low-tech now. And homosexual blackmail pops up rather often, notably the blackmail that killed Jackie's friend when *Tin,* he was young and that led to his joining up with C.A.M.P. I bring

angst that story into each of the books. But so much has changed in the social world, homosexuals now aren't as subject to blackmail as they were then. So I don't feel that plot device would play out today.

FC: What part did the series have in your overall literary output?

VB: That was a long time ago, of course. Although I did a considerable number of other gay books at the time (dozens, literally), I eventually went on to other things when the gay publishing scene drifted into the area of formula sex stories in the early seventies. By 1974 Pyramid Books was billing me—well, Jan Alexander as the "Queen of Gothic Romance" their terminology, not mine. And later I wrote historical fiction as V J. Banis. I stopped counting when my books got past the 100 mark. I think overall I wrote about 140. So, really, those nine or ten C.A.M.P. books were only a small part of the total, but I like to think a special part. And an historically significant part, I do believe.

FC: What about before the C.A.M.P. books?

VB: I actually started writing for my own amusement when I was a gay teen, but so far as published works, I hadn't done a lot up to that point. Some short pieces, some verse, maybe a half-dozen books mostly heterosexual novels and some lesbian-slanted ones. At the time, in the early sixties, publishers were afraid of gay material. In 1963 a pair of Fresno [California] publishers, Sanford Aday and Wallace de Ortega Maxey, were convicted on obscenity charges and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. Mind you, this was not because the sexual content of the books was anything remarkable. They were actually tepid compared to heterosexual works of the time —the Mickey Spillane novels, for instance, or even Kathleen Winsor. What rendered them obscene in the opinion of the U.S. government was simply their homosexual content. So this sent a chill through the publishing industry. But, really even as far back as 1950, Gore Vidal was blacklisted by the mainstream publishers for his *The City and the Pillar—for* which, by the way, *The New York Times* refused to run an ad. So there was always this strong bias against gay material.

FC: When did all of that begin to change?

VB: In 1964, Grove Press—that would be Barney Rosset—published John Rechy's *City of Night,* which was a landmark event for gay literature. But Rosset had already been in the legal arena, all the way up to the Supreme Court, for publishing the unexpurgated version *of Lady Chatterley's Lover,* and he was not easily intimidated by threats of obscenity charges. And as I've said, the federal authorities regarded

anything to do with homosexuality or lesbianism as automatically obscene. I had already had my own difficulties on that issue. But anyway, by 1965, after the Aday and Maxey disaster, no one would take the risk of publishing homosexually oriented fiction until Greenleaf Classics gave the green light to my *The Why Not.* So you could say that novel really opened the doors. And I want to emphasize that my editor at Greenleaf Earl Kemp, showed considerable courage in making that decision. I have said often, and it can't be said too often, that Earl Kemp was the Godfather of gay publishing.

FC: So, *The Why Not* preceded *The Man from C.A.M.P.* as your very first gay novel?

VB: Yes, I sold *The Why Not* to Greenleaf in 1965 and it was published in 1966. *The Man from C.A.M.P.* followed a few months later. It was really *The Why Not* that opened the door, but *The Man from C.A.M.P.* changed the rules so far as the nature of gay fiction. So they both were significant.

FC: What circulation did the C.A.M.P. books have?

VB: They sold phenomenally well, all of them in the six figures, I was told by the publisher. Part of that was due to the peculiarities of pulp distribution. Unlike books out of the mainstream houses, most of whom had their own distribution network, these books were distributed with magazines and so often reached places that they wouldn't have gone to otherwise. I bought Nials Kent's *The Divided Path* which by the way was the first reference I had seen in print to "gay" with a homosexual connotation—What I started to say was, I found this on the rack in my small-town drugstore in the early fifties. I certainly wouldn't have found it in the local book-stores in Ohio, where I grew up. And it was very meaningful to a teenage homosexual who really didn't know any others like himself; but I have to say the picture that it painted of what lay before me was bleak indeed. Too, those earlier paperbacks often had ambiguous titles and even artwork that made it hard to tell that they were homosexual in nature. I suspect there must have been an occasional fifties book buyer startled to find himself reading gay fiction when he thought he was getting something else. But of course that would not have happened with the C.A.M.P. books and their altogether flamboyant covers. I might add that those covers, too, were a bold departure for Greenleaf, unlike anything that had been done before. You'd have to be blind not to guess what these books were about. They were shouting their gayness to the world—just as their readers would soon come to do also.

FC: Was the whole series planned from the beginning, or were the sequels due to the success of the first novels?

VB: Very much the latter. The first of them created a small sensation, and Greenleaf was eager to see more. The gay press was eager to interview me, and I became something of a celebrity in gay circles. A dear friend, Elbert Barrow, who was the original model for Lady Agatha, a recurring character in the series, adopted the Lady Agatha name for himself and became a popular fixture on the Los Angeles gay scene of the late sixties and early seventies. He even penned a couple of spin-offs, a C.A.M.P. cookbook, and an astrology guide. And, inevitably, several imitators sprang into action. It was all great fun, and no one took it very seriously, me least of all.

FC: I must confess I don't think I realized that there was a gay press at that time.

VB: Well, it was very much a fledgling gay press. As far aback as the fifties The Mattachine Society published a review, and ONE, Inc. published *ONE* magazine—Joseph Hanson gave *The Why Not* a wonderful review in *ONE* magazine. And there was *DerKreis* out of Switzerland. *The Advocate* started up in the sixties, but it was a small newspaper—four pages, if memory serves me, or maybe eight—and not the magazine it eventually became. There were a number of other small, cheaply done local papers, at least in Los Angeles, but I think in New York as well, and probably in other major cities. Or, more correctly, other cities with major gay populations.

FC: You've mentioned that your output was prodigious. What were your writing habits? How did you write the C.A.M.P. books, for instance?

VB: Well, I certainly was not aiming for literary fame with those books. As I said, I was mostly just having fun. The manuscripts were sold for, if memory serves me, $500 each, at least at the start. By this time, I was writing to make a living. I thought of writing as a job, a business, and I invested my time accordingly. I sat down at the typewriter at 8:00 a.m. just as I would ff1 had gone off to work. On an average, I spent five days per book. Which is to say, they were written strictly *off* the top of the head, with little time or thought for rewrite or any polishing up of my prose. I've read that Georges Simenon took about two weeks to write a book, and he managed to produce some fine literature at that speed, but I don't flatter myself that I could. The C.A.M.P. manuscripts were, to put it nicely, “rough.” I'm surprised when I read them now that they came out as good as they did. And I

have to admit, at their worst, the books exemplify the bad writing habits that, as time went by, I scolded other writers to avoid.

FC: In your Author's Note, you state that the publisher often padded the books out to bring them up to the needed length by adding jarringly heterosexual sex scenes. Now, does this mean that the series did not only have a gay readership, but a wider audience? Who wrote and who read gay pulps in the mid-1960s?

VB: Hmm, that's really two different questions. As to the first one, I doubt that the books reached any significant heterosexual readership. Maybe a closeted gay or two, and as I said, before the C.A.M.P. books, gay pulp often had highly ambiguous covers and titles. *Finistère* by Fritz Peters, for instance, which was popular with gays in the fifties, now that title certainly wouldn't give you any clue as to what the book was about, nor would the cover, which showed an unhappy-looking man in the foreground and a man and woman couple on a sofa behind him. I think that the heterosexual scenes added to C.A.M.P. mostly reflect the sexuality of the editors, but I think, too, that these editors thought they had to appeal to a heterosexual audience as well. I don't believe that anyone in publishing realized the potential numbers of the audience that was out there for gay material. Up to this point when I had approached publishers about doing gay novels, the usual response was, “Who would buy them?” You have to realize, too, that the definitions, or perhaps I should say the lifestyles, of gay, straight, lesbian, etc., were not as clear as they are today. Most gays and lesbians at least attempted to integrate themselves into a straight society. Many of them were married, had children, lived ostensibly straight lives. So those editors can be forgiven for not knowing exactly what this audience was going to be, or be turned on by. Now, when you asked who wrote these pulp novels, the answer is rather surprising. A great many so-called “uptown” writers wrote for the pulp field as well, most of them for Greenleaf. Writers like Marion Zimmer Bradley, Harlan Ellison, Evan Hunter, John Jakes, Donald Westlake—almost a who's who of writers of the sixties. Scott Meredith, the noted New York literary agent, was an original (silent) partner in Greenleaf, so he brought much of his writing stable on board. And of course, there were other writers like myself who went on to mainstream publishing. So that too commonly held view of the pulp writers of that time as hacks doesn't match up to reality.

FC: Your books are sparkling examples of l960s pulp, and as such they have by now gained a significant cult following. How do you feel about being a camp icon after all these years, and when did you recognize yourself as one such icon?

VB: I was more surprised than anything else. I'm embarrassed to say that my copies of the C.A.M.P. books were lost in the course of several moves I made over the years, and some of what I carried around I simply tossed when I came to San Francisco in the eighties, thinking they were of no value. So by the early nineties, the books had long been out of print and out of circulation, and to be honest, they were little more to me than memories, albeit fond ones. In fact, when you suggested, some time ago, that I should think about reissuing the C.A.M.P. series, my first reaction was who would be interested at all?

FC: Well, I did suspect there might be many interested people.

VB: And you were right. As it turned out, quite a few people were. Prompted by a friend who was intrigued to hear about these efforts from my past, I set out to see if I could find copies. I started on a sunny San Francisco afternoon at Bolerium Books, whose specialty is the pulp fiction of that era. When I mentioned the Don Holliday byline, the man behind the desk exclaimed in delight, “You're the Man from C.A.M.P.!” Frankly, I was amazed to discover that anyone even remembered the title. I soon came to understand, however, that there were a great many people in and out of the book business who were eager to talk to me about these books—yourself included. It turns out that there was more than one Don Holliday—that's another story—so there had been for years some mystery as to who actually wrote the C.A.M.P. books. Plus, it seemed they had become collector's material and the subject of a great deal of scholarly research on the part of social historians.

FC: I myself had a shock of recognition when you told me that you authored the novels I had been seeking for so long, that you were the Man from C.A.M.P.,” in fact. Now that you tell me, there is something of a resemblance between you and Jackie Holmes as he appears on the cover of the first novel. After all, the identification between the author and the secret agent/detective is a recurrent trait of spy and crime fiction, making say—James Bond and Miss Marple projections of Ian Fleming and Agatha Christie. If I may ask you some gossip, what did you share with your hero?

VB: [laughs] Gosh, now that's a difficult one for me to answer. I should probably say that, at that time, I actually looked a bit like that cover on *The Man from C.A.M.P.* and I did have a white poodle. As a matter of fact, I was approached at one time by a producer who wanted to film that book, with me as Jackie Holmes, but that project never got off the ground. And I guess, with the legal complications of producing pulp fiction at the time, I did sort of live a secret life. All

gays did at that time, to a certain extent. Certainly all gay writers.

FC: The pulp author as secret agent, I like that. You too, with the many pseudonyms you adopted (Jan Alexander, Elizabeth Monterey, TI Lynn Benedict, Jessica Stuart, Victor Jay, Bob Michaels, J. X. Wilhams, Jay Vickery, Jay Symon) were a kind of literary cross-dresser, after all. Why did you use them, while in some cases (on publishing, say, *The Why Not)* you didn't? And who was Don Holliday? You mentioned earlier that there was more than one was that just a kind of collective name, a mask used by pulp publishers?

VB: Well, to answer the second part of that first, the original Don Holliday was a writer named Hal Dresner, who did quite a bit of work for Greenleaf. In time, Greenleaf began to use that name as a house byline for a number of authors this was not uncommon in the industry, especially where so many of these writers, name writers, wouldn't have wanted to use their own bylines. When Earl Kemp purchased the first C.A.M.P., he intended to use a different, unshared byline on it, but by mistake it was attributed to Don Holliday, and of course, once the first one had been published, it was too late to change that. As to the other part of your question, when I wrote *The Why Not* I did not think of it as a pulp novel, nor did Earl, I believe. Earl tells me that of the thousands of manuscripts he dealt with in those car days, this was one of only one or two that made a real impression upon him. Apparently his “reader” brought *it* directly to him after looking at only a few pages, to tell him that he ought to read this himself, and Earl bought the book without even reading the entire manuscript.

I don't want to *give* the impression this was Pulitzer Prize material. Nevertheless, and despite the risks involved in doing homosexual fiction in those days, I thought it warranted using my own name. But I had no literary aspirations when I wrote C.A.M.P. And in a way, the C.A.M.P. books were far riskier, because I was offering a different kind of gay protagonist, openly gay and proud of it, seducing straight men at every opportunity—this was like waving a red flag for the authorities. So I guess there was an element of cowardice—well, let's say discretion—in hiding behind a pseudonym with those books.

FC: You said the C.A.M.P. novels have become collector's material. The C.A.M.P. covers can be seen in many Web sites, books, and postcards devoted to pulp fiction, and I have seen an autographed copy of *The Man from CAMP* being sold for $125 on a commercial Web site.

VB: Actually, someone recently offered an autographed copy of *The Man from C.A.M.P.* for $150 and one of *The Why Not* for $175, books that were sold at the time for seventy-five cents. Talk about inflation. And, yes, the covers are ubiquitous. I've also seen a comic strip on the Internet called “The Man from C.A.M.P.,” but what I saw of the story line seemed to have no resemblance to the originals—I think it's more likely someone just borrowed the title. Since that day at Bolerium, when I first realized people are still interested in the series, I have encountered a veritable army of fans, many of whom still treasure their original copies. I have communicated with interested scholars from Princeton and Stanford. I have chatted and corresponded with book dealers and collectors from around the country, even—literally—from around the world. In your authoritative volume on camp—which I liked very much, by the way—you cited *The Man from C.A.M.P.—and* me—as illustrative of the camp phenomena of the sixties. Well-known writers such as David Bergman, Michael Bronski, and Susan Stryker have discussed the series in their own works—I don't think I've seen a single history of that period, in fact, that didn't mention them. Catalogs and specialty shops offer them at inflated prices, and Lynn Munroe Books in southern California recently conducted an online auction of my books, including the C.A.M.P. series. So, yes, I would have to say they are collectors’ items.

FC: How do you explain this enduring interest in your darling Jackie Holmes and his confreres?

VB: I honestly don't know if I can explain it. The books were fun to write, certainly, and a great many people then and now have said they are fun to read. To be honest, though, I don't think even their most ardent fans would describe them in literary terms; as I said, the books were written very fast, once through and done. Plus, they were short, novellas really I doubt if any of them reached forty-thousand words, and even at that, it's easy to see where a skimpy story line got stretched to the max. There's plenty of sex, to be sure. Jackie (and nearly every man he met) was insatiable, but the sex is tepid compared even to today's romance novels. As I said, most of the people to whom I posed the question had a very simple answer they are fun to read. I think most novelists would be happy with that review. In talking to others, however—historians, sociologists, scholars in the field of gay studies—I have come to understand that the books have historical significance beyond their entertainment value.

FC: Could we claim that, in a way, Jackie Holmes was the first gay superhero?

VB: Definitely so. Oh, he couldn't fly like Superman and he didn't wear a funky costume well, all right, in *Rally Round the Fag,* he dons the traditional 'suit of light" of the matador, the *traje de laces,* but that was a one-time thing. Nor did he have any "super powers. But, within the limits of human capabilities, there wasn't much that Jackie couldn't or didn't do, and do better than anyone else. He was the world's best shot and a champion with throwing knives. In that suit of light, he fought a bull—and won. He drove his collection of classic cars like a pro; he could run with the fastest stars of track and lift several times his own weight. He was a trained expert in diamonds, spoke every language he encountered, and well, you get the idea. Flying with a cape over his shoulders was about the only thing he didn't do with ease. At a time when gays were still being pummeled into the cellar of self-esteem, Jackie was gay, proud, and more than a match for any heterosexual. No wonder queens loved him.

FC: In other words, he was a superb sub-cultural icon.

VB: Absolutely. Jackie took every cliché leveled at gays and turned them upside down inside out. Gays were supposed to be either tops or bottoms, for instance. Jackie went at it every way including sideways. Yes, he could certainly swish, as all gays were alleged to do in those days, but he could deliver a haymaker that would leave his opponent out cold. He owned that white poodle featured on the cover—the very dog that symbolized gays in so many minds but Sophie had razor-sharp teeth and was trained to kill. In nearly every book, the straight men are surprised at Jackie's interest in and knowledge of cars—gays were supposed to cook and curl hair, not drive fancy classic automobiles. And as for that old canard about gays being out to seduce every straight man they meet? In book after book, Jackie always managed to get his man in the end—so to speak. Treasury Agent Ted Summers. Andy Parks of the Secret Service. Rock star Dingo Stark. An endless assortment. Better yet, *it* was they who inevitably came, panting and eager, to him. Talk about a queen's fantasy!

FC: On being offered to do this reprint of three C.A.M.P. novels, you chose the title *Rebel Without a Pause,* echoing the mid-1950s movie, *Rebel Without a Cause,* and its mainstream icon, James Dean (who by the way appears, albeit camped up, as the star of *The Son Goes Down).* Are you implying that Jackie Holmes might have played a role parallel, however in a camp way, to the one of James Dean?

VB: Well, James Dean personified and gave a voice to the frustrations of the youth of his generation. In the process, he no doubt changed

the role of youth in our society forever. For the first time in our Western culture, the young would come out of their closets, would see themselves, and insist upon being seen, as people in their own right and not merely adjuncts to their families or adult society, individuals with needs, emotions, longings, fears—the whole panoply vi of human feeling. Of course, I don't mean to imply that, in his role as a rebel symbol, Jackie's influence was *that* far reaching his target audience, after all, was much smaller. But he, too, challenged an established mind-set not unlike that which had dominated the youth of a decade before, that of a necessary submission to the established order, and gave voice to a great number of gays just emerging from their closets. In today's terminology, I suppose we'd call the concept of C.A.M.P. “empowering."

FC: In this regard, what place would you assign, retrospectively, to C.A.M.P. within gay history?

VB: Gay culture was changed forever in that sexual revolution of the sixties, and that social revolution, the gay revolution, was fed by the parallel revolution in gay publishing. I don't want to overstate the case, but if Jackie didn't launch that gay publishing revolution, he was certainly in the vanguard. And I believe that C.A.M.P., too, even though it was fictional, was a delicious breath of fresh air in those dark, preliberation days. There were gay organizations already in place by that time: Mattachine, the Daughters of Bilitis, ONE, Inc. But they were ultradiscreet and politically fragile. Today's “in your face” activists ACT U~ Community United Against Violence, The Lavender Berets were still in the future. I'd like to think that maybe one or two of their founders took inspiration from the all-powerful C.A.M.P. But the real significance of the C.A.M.P. series, according to a growing body of opinion among historians, is that these books and the many others that suddenly burst on the scene in that late sixties era were among the first factors in creating a sense of community among gay and lesbians. And I think that point is well taken.

FC: Could we thus also assign to C.A.M.P. (as many critics claim for its lower case, dotless version, camp) the value and significance of a survival strategy, envisioned in C.A.M.P.'s aim to “protect and advance homosexuals” until justice eventually triumphs and the world becomes a better place, as Jackie says?

VB: Yes, I think so. It's difficult for those who didn't experience the time to appreciate how different things were for gays in the fifties and early sixties. Gay life then was very much an underground experience. There were bars and certain clubs, and every city had its gay

hangouts, and there was always some place where men met for quick and uncomplicated sex, if not social intercourse.

There were books, too—a few of them, at least. I've already mentioned Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* and Nials Kent's *The Divided Path.* All told, I think there may have been a couple of dozen gay novels published in the twenty or thirty years leading up to 1963, and in the next ten years, at least a thousand—some say as many as four thousand. That is a major change, wouldn't you agree?

There was a depressing similarity to those pre-1963 books, too. The characters lived in the shadows, they slunk into bed together, wracked with guilt. In the end, in nearly all of them, the gay character died or suffered some tragic end. It's been called the “sad young men” school of writing, and with good reason.

I recall one notable exception: Lonnie Coleman's 1955 novel, *Ship's Company* included a vignette, *The Theban Warriors,* and this selection was much passed around in an anonymous mimeographed version—so much passed around that I suspect it probably enjoyed a greater readership than any gay novel of the time. What made *The Theban Warriors* unique was that the lead character, a sailor, was blatantly gay and unintimidated by the straight men in the ship's crew. He outboxes the straight narrator he is obviously trying to seduce and even, in a visit to a whorehouse, outfucks him, before finally having his way. But that was an exception. Few publishers would even have imagined doing a gay novel where the hero or heroes lived happily ever after. You wanted “those people” to feel guilt and fear and to be punished for their “sins.” One shudders.

FC: That makes a real difference with the life of outrageous pleasure, commitment, and reward one would find in C.A.M.P. You mentioned having legal difficulties—was this in regard to C.A.M.P.?

VB: No, that was earlier, in 1964 as a result of a quasi-lesbian novel I had written, *The Affairs of Gloria,* which the federal government decided was obscene. And I presume that was because of the lesbianism. It certainly was not because of any frankness in the language. The book had one “damn” in it as I recall. Anyway, the result was I found myself a defendant in a major federal obscenity trial, set in Sioux City, Iowa. As an aside, I might say, if gay life in Los Angeles in 1964 was underground, in Sioux City it was somewhere near the center of the earth. It was certainly an enlightening experience; and with the prospect of ten years in prison hanging over my head, a frightening one as well which wants telling in some other

volume. And one, unfortunately, experienced by numerous writers and publishers in what was then the very early stages of the movement toward freedom of expression. The owners of DSI, a Minneapolis-based company that pioneered in mail-order sales of nude and seminude photos of men went through their own trial and, luckily, like me, were acquitted (my codefendants in Sioux City weren't so lucky they were convicted, though the convictions were later overturned on appeal).

FC: That was in 1964. Two years later you introduced Jackie Holmes, which is not exactly what the federal authorities might have hoped for, is it?

VB: It's an ill wind, as they say. Now, I should probably point out that the acquittal in Sioux City did not exactly end my problems with the federal government. Over the next several years, Big Brother went out of his way to let me know that he had his eye on me. As a for instance, my mail was left at my doorstep on top of the opened envelopes so that I would know it had been read—that was illegal, of course, but these people didn't much bother with legal niceties.

I do think that one of the points of this harassment was to discourage me from writing any more pulp fiction, hut in fact the result was just the opposite. I am a stubborn critter when faced with what I consider injustice, and I felt compelled to show that I had not been intimidated. So I set out to write gay novels, despite a publishing climate that said you couldn't do that. Fortunately, the notoriety from the trial opened doors to me. The pulp publishing world was like a small town, and everyone knew who I was and that I had earned my chops, so to speak, in Sioux City. That probably made Earl Kemp more inclined to buy *The Why Not* and subsequently the C.A.M.P. books; and in the wake of their success I was able not only to peddle gay books to other houses, but editors—again Earl Kemp was a stellar example—were agreeable to the idea that gay novels could be romantic rather than tragic, could be funny, could be just about anything, just as varied as the books published for heterosexual readers. So you could say that my indictment on obscenity charges ultimately led to that gay paperback explosion, which certainly wasn't what the federal government intended.

FC: The trial therefore was, at least as far as you are concerned, an unintended factor among the complex cultural transformation factors producing the gay pulp fiction as a mass phenomenon of the late sixties, as social historians claim?

VB: Exactly. It seemed as if overnight there was an explosion of gay fiction and nonfiction. There was a joke going around at the time that the revolution in gay publishing was happening mostly in my kitchen, and in all modesty, there's a great deal of truth in that statement. Not only did my then-partner and I, and Lady Agatha, who was our secretary at the time, churn out a long list of books, but I soon came to represent other writers, two or maybe three dozen others, whom I trained and nurtured through their early manuscripts. For a time, somewhere around seventy-five percent of what was being published in the gay pulp field—which means what was being published in the gay field period came from our stable of writers. So it really is not exaggeration to say that revolution took place across my kitchen table, which is where we mostly met.

I want to say, though, that the important thing here wasn't my success or that of my companion writers. What was really important was that gay publishing had arrived as a major genre of its an own. (Gay paperback publishing, at any rate. The hardcover publishers were slower to get on the bandwagon, but they got around to it in time, when they caught the scent of money in the air.) Suddenly from being under the counter, gay fiction occupied entire walls in bookstores and eventually entire stores.

FC: That sounds much like the coming out of a whole gay scene. The gay pulp market and liberation might thus be taken to have had a common birth.

VB: Yes. And it was a heady experience to come out from under the covers, to be able to walk unashamedly into a store in broad daylight and buy not one but two, three, a dozen books of whatever sort we wanted. Funny books, scary books, cookbooks, westerns, mysteries they were all there, and so were we. We shopped and cruised and chatted, and in the process began to perceive that we were far less alone than we had thought up until then. And I do believe that it was here as much as anywhere, among the beefcake covers and the campy titles and the astonishing variety of stories and themes that were suddenly there for us, that the sense of community, of oneness, that would soon lead to Stonewall act and the Castro and the entire gay revolution, first took seed. Like the new heroes of their novels, the gays of the sixties left the shadows, gave up the slinking and the guilt. Here indeed, there be rebels, and in no time at all, those rebels were marching in the streets and holding their rainbow flags aloft for all to see.

FC: The overlap between the gay pulp market and gay liberation

brings up the troublesome issue of politics. Gay pulp has been called a "homotopia" (David Seubert's term), a utopia of rambunctious gay passion which makes no room for women and real-life issues; and gay camp has often been charged with misogyny and racism. From your position of inside knowledge, what were the politics of C.A.M.P.?

VB: First off, I would take exception with the charge that the books make no room for real-life issues. They were fantasies, of course, and no more nor less grounded in real life than the James Bond books. But as I've said already, they did address questions of gay rights, of gay self-esteem, of injustice I don't know what could be more "real life" than that.

Nor do I think the books were racist. I suppose that some unconscious elements of racism may have crept in—I think especially in *The Watercress File,* which is my least favorite of the books. There was a lot of unconscious racism in the society of that time but it has to be remembered that the love of Jackie's life, as revealed in *Blow the Man Down,* was Black Rose and no, Rose wasn't a girl's name.

The question of misogyny is a little more difficult. I don't really think they were misogynistic, certainly not in any dislike or disparagement of women. I don't recall anywhere in the books where anyone put women down. It was more that women hardly appeared in the books. Rosarita Beech was the proverbial "madame with the heart of gold," and there was a gay actress in *Color Him Gay,* but even the villainous Big Daddy doesn't really get to strut her stuff. But if you look, I think you would find a parallel world in the lesbian books of the era. That was the point, after all, was characters that those readers could identify with and fantasies that they wanted to revel in. Lesbians then or now weren't fantasizing about gay boys, nor vice versa.

FC: Would you say then that the gay and the lesbian worlds were separate realms?

VB: Yes, to some degree. Now, I grew up in the Midwest, my early gay years were in Dayton, Ohio, which was just a small farm-belt city, and most of the time our one gay bar was The Latin Lounge, though occasionally another would pop up for a while. So gays and lesbians mingled out of necessity, and out of safety as well, because we were less conspicuous that way. And I think people there and then were more tolerant of homosexuality than one might expect, so long as you didn't flaunt it, if you kept up a bit of a facade. I had a very lovely and dear lesbian friend, what today is called a "lipstick lesbian," which is to say she was quite feminine, and we socialized together much of the

time, so while we didn't pretend to romance, we were certainly affectionate, and I think that even though people were not really fooled, they were willing to fool themselves. It made things more comfortable for them, and we were more accepted as a duo than we might have been singly.

When I came to Los Angeles early in the sixties, however, I found the gay and lesbian worlds very much separate, though I myself always did have close lesbian friends. But it's worth mentioning here that lesbians have always had a unique problem with straight men wanting to hit on them, so that even today there are many lesbian bars and clubs where they just don't like to see men, even gay-acting men. There's fewer instances of straight women hitting on gay men, although it does happen. I had a boy friend I mean, really, just a friend who was straight but who pretended to be gay, because so many women felt compelled to try to “cure” him.

FC: I guess the very idea of a gay community is more complex than one thinks. I have also noticed that in these novels, Jackie fights against FC other gay people who happen to be villains, so it wasn't just that he was at war with the straight community.

VB: Not at all. C.A.M.P. was not a sort of gay mafia, promoting homosexuals regardless of what they did, good or bad. It wasn't, in fact, a FC separatist organization. Jackie works and fucks with Interpol and straight guys against all kinds of evildoers, gay and straight.

FC: If I may, I would ask you some insider knowledge that might be revealed, for we would surely be betraying no vital secret today. Maybe Jackie told you: ever settled what that acronym C.A.M.P. stands for?

VB: Well, I think I might be putting myself at risk even today if I revealed that information. But I will remind you that Jackie once said that C might stand for sucker though I don't know if he was being honest or just pulling someone's leg.

FC: So, the mystery is still unsolved, and we may infer that it still is vital to keep it somehow secret, for C.A.M.P. might still be working out there. It may well be that it has developed new branches, such as history, politics, or academia (I know a few people who might, in fact, be C.A.M.P. agents). Where is Jackie Holmes now, what has he been doing these years? Is there any chance that we should hear again of him?

VB: Interestingly, the question of Jackie's coming out of retirement has come up recently. And we can certainly see from today's headlines that homosexuals are still very much at risk in our world. So, I think there are still contributions that C.A.M.P. could make, don't you? I think it might be premature to get into that area, however.

FC: Are there other writing projects in the works that you could tell us about?

VB: I have recently finished a book of memoirs, *Spine Intact, Some Creases,* and I am hoping to see that published soon.

FC: That's an unusual title. Where did that come from?

VB: It was a phrase I ran across in a used-book catalog, describing the condition of a book that was offered. But I thought it applied to me quite well, too.

FC: So we will get to read the story of your life.

VB: Well, actually, it's more the story of my contributions to the revolution, which is far more of interest, I believe, and certainly more important.

FC: I note that when you refer to that era, to the gay liberation movement and to the social unrest of that time, you use the term "revolution." Do you really mean that in the historical, the literal sense as, say, the French Revolution?

VB: Absolutely. I don't personally think that many social historians have yet grasped the enormity of what happened in that time frame, in the sixties and the early seventies, perhaps because we are still too close to it. But I think that when they look back upon that time from the perspective of the future, they will see it not only as a true revolution in the fullest sense of the word, but perhaps the greatest, the most far reaching, in our history. When you look for instance at that French Revolution, certainly there were effects on other cultures, other societies, but really, it was a local event, a national revolution. But the sexual and the social upheavals of the sixties were multinational, they directly involved our entire Western culture, and indirectly went far beyond that. If you take much of what has happened in the world just over the last decade, say, the fall of communism, or even the terrorist activities of the last couple of years, you can trace a direct line back to the sixties and seventies.

FC: Granted, then, that this might be considered a true historical

revolution, what do you think then has been the end result of this revolution?

VB: Well, I don't think we are at the end of it yet. It takes any revolution a good century to play itself out. The Russians are still coming to grips with the events of 1917, aren't they? Or, to take another example, our American Revolution, that began in the late eighteenth century, but it was the late nineteenth century before the country had evolved into a true national entity. So I think it will be another fifty, sixty years before the dust has settled on our sixties revolution. And, in the meantime, I fear that much of the history of that event is being lost. So many people, the individuals who were around before that happened, or who took part in it, so many of the gay people, in any event, are gone. The AIDS epidemic devastated the gay community, certainly, and of course, time itself takes a toll. So I thought it important to get my little story told before it was too late.

FC: And I for one look forward to reading it. And may I say, thank you, and welcome back, Victor.

VB: My pleasure, Fabio.

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About the Author

Lecturer, former writing instructor and early rabble-rouser for gay rights and freedom of the press, **Victor J. Banis** is the critically acclaimed author *(" ... a master storyteller" Publishers Weekly)* of more than 150 published novels and nonfiction works, and his verse and short pieces have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. His novel *Longhorns* (Carroll and Graf) was picked as best gay romance of the 2007 on AfterElton.com. His latest novel, *Lola Dances*, was published by MLR Press in March, 2008. Next up, *Deadly Nightshade*, MLR Press, summer 2008. Visit Victor at his website www.vjbanis.com.

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